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## The Phenomenon of Political Humor as a Strategic Tool in Comedy TV Shows in Pakistan

### ABSTRACT

*Humor, which is primarily designed to amuse, can occasionally be more serious than regular news when utilized with political intent. Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of humor in politics. Comedy programs are, therefore, the opposite of news programs and attract a larger audience. People who are tired of difficult news discussions prefer fun political programs. It has been established that all types of political comedy programs are the primary source of political news for the public, particularly the younger generation. We collected qualitative data of a humorous nature for Pakistani perspectives on humor in comedy shows. Through, Online sources we have compiled information about the selected episodes of the Aftab Iqbal-hosted program. The obtained data is studied through the prism of Dmitry Chernobrov's strategic comedy theory. This study indicates that the Aftab Iqbal-hosted comedy series serves political aims and promotes a particular political leader and party by criticizing and imitating other parties and leaders.*

**Keywords:** Humor, political, agenda, Pakistan, comedy show

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## **Introduction**

Humor is typically considered amusing, yet it may also be serious: it can be more serious than any other news. When employed in political humor shows, it takes on a serious tone. Many studies have demonstrated the importance of humor in politics (Nye, 2010). Brassett (2016) employs humor as a serious political tool. Comedy shows are the polar opposite of hard news shows; hence, they attract a larger audience. People who are tired of hard news arguments prefer to watch entertaining political shows. According to Baym (2005), comedy offers political news and claims that all sorts of political comedy performances serve as a source of political news for the public, particularly the younger generation. The audience finds it easier to recall the difficulties highlighted in comedy shows since they are presented in an amusing manner (Becker, 2013). Political satire has a powerful impact on people who are unfamiliar with current events. Young (2004) proposes that people with a low level of factual understanding of politics are more susceptible to political humor. Comedy political shows have an advantage over other political shows in that they are perceived as jokes and, hence, are not inspected. Due to this advantage, critics believe that comedy shows can readily explore contentious themes without relying on factual proof (Gilbert, 2004). Studies have demonstrated unequivocally that comedy is more than just a type of entertainment, it is also a significant form of media with a purpose.

## **Literature Review**

Comedy shows are the complete antithesis of hard news broadcasts due to their greater ability to catch public attention; this phenomenon is heightened in the case of political humor, which has a greater influence on the audience. Furthermore, people with less exposure to factual information about political events are more inclined to engage in humor. When compared to purely political talk shows, comedy-political shows garner more attention due to the perception that they are just jokes. Gilbert (2004) believes that comedy shows may readily explore contentious themes without requiring any factual evidence; thus, they are a technique for conveying or creating a serious impression. The human brain follows a pattern, and audiences are influenced by repetitious and humorous representations (Chong and Druckman, 2007). Furthermore, humor can shape patterns and aid in the structuring of issues, which is known as rhetorical presentation. Rhetorical presentation provides a straightforward understanding of what is happening and produces wider appeal for the masses on the one hand while influencing the media on the other due to its seeming newsworthiness. Berinsky and Kinder (2006: 640) explain how media presents issues for audiences and how people view

complicated situations by 'ordering material in a manner that corresponds to the framework of a good story' in a study dealing with media perceptions leading to various crises at the international level. Taking this viewpoint into account, humor is simply a technique to tell a "good story," but this viewpoint would shape up crucial aspects by framing its decisive notch between the extremely wide line of real and unreal, and between the expected and the realized. This propensity causes people to identify with a single side (Hall, 2014). This propensity is heightened in political communication, where humor may convey highly serious information in an informal and amusing manner (Shilikhina, 2013). To take the discussion a step further, consider Brassett's (2016: 175) definition of comedy as "serious politics": a productive, imaginative, and relational "practice of political opposition in its own right." This serious politics reveals audiences' proclivity to criticize hierarchies and ponder politics from a critical standpoint. As a result, comedy tends to delegitimize diverse political formations and question power dynamics. In a similar vein, Berlant and Ngai (2017) see humor as an enhancer in the face of increased 'commodification of the public sphere,' fueled by the expanding of social class gaps. In this approach, humor serves to define different identities as well as the bounds of what is permitted. As a result, comedy is vital in a much broader sector, even though some varieties of humor are not covered here.

The expanding importance of comedy in political news is a growing phenomenon in politics. Various studies, evaluating politics in a democratic context reveal that comedy programs with a political sarcastic tone, as well as other sorts of humor, have the ability to present a reliable substitute for news to the younger generation (Baym, 2005; Feldman and Young, 2008). Interestingly, humor on social media has gained prominence due to its innovative tools for producing political satire through semiotics such as various memes, miniatures, and cartoons; thus, jokes presented to social media users serve as perception builders, which further aid in the construction of political identities presented by traditional mainstream media (Shifman et al., 2007). Tay (2015) believes that some popular websites with this social media power shape political discourse, including humor, that influences perception during major events such as elections, and that audiences pay serious attention to this subjective perception towards serious and delicate issues of foreign policy. Generally, jokes, including political controversies, combine many components of newsworthiness, such as surprise and entertainment, are extensively circulated, and approach powerful elites. They are largely follow-ups to previously published news (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017). People with little access to factual knowledge were more influenced by political comedy, and the impact was far- greater than for those with better access to factual knowledge (Young, 2004). However, several academics admit that accurately measuring the

persuasiveness of political humor is challenging (Innocent and Miller, 2016). In this regard, it has been found that audiences in general are becoming more penetrated by political comedy, which they associate with regular political news broadcasts on mainstream media (Becker, 2013). As a result, scholars such as Farnsworth and Lichter (2020) argue that such mockery of political media may damage public trust in political leaders and media personalities (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2020).

Political comedies and satire combine facts with personal desires. According to Furman and Musgrave (2017), they create 'synthetic experiences,' which means they provide fewer facts but develop fulfilling notions based on fictional thought by replacing genuine details. Because of its ability to shape audience perception, it is difficult to separate fact from fiction. It is even more difficult to contest the authenticity of news or assertions spread through comedy since they tend to position themselves outside of a rational argument. As a result, humor is used to emphasize views that are contentious and cannot be voiced without severe consequences (Gilbert, 2004). With the advent of media digitalization, social media has acquired a constant effect through post-truth culture, and it aids in the construction of political narratives and counter-narratives (Surowiec and Manor, 2020). The post-truth phenomenon reflects a preference for personal belief via emotional appeal above the value of objective facts in molding public opinion (Crilley, 2018). As Crilley and Chatterje-Doody (2020) show in their study, satire and mocking tend to impact not only national concerns, but also diplomacy and ties with foreign countries. They argue that platform conventions and emotive register are just as important as the many narratives of legitimation statements; hence, humor and satire may be important agents in the legitimation of actions, contestation of opposing perspectives, and identity creation. In national mythologies, winners always mock losers after wars or matches, and this form of humor develops distinct types of identities for both sides (Waterlow, 2013). This form of humor has eventually been used to insult them in cartoons, miniatures, and memes, which is, of course, part of the politics of blame and stigmatization (Davies, 2015). So, from this perspective, comedy has a proclivity to be replicated because it reaffirms identity limits.

From a Pakistani perspective, media outlets could utilize comedy as a political propaganda technique to affect people's perceptions. Aftab Iqbal's late-night shows are one example of comedy shows in Pakistani mainstream media. Iqbal is the first person in Pakistan to introduce this type of show. This show has gone by several titles, including *Hasb-e-Hall*, *Khabardar*, *Khabarzar*, and *Khabaryar*. The program is broken into sections. Food, singing, political comedy, and general knowledge are some of its segments. The purpose of this research is to examine how the political humor component of his concerts serves the purpose of political propaganda. In his

shows, Iqbal plays a partisan who favors one of Pakistan's major political parties. In the political humor section, he gives the Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf (PTI) an advantage over the other political parties. The staff of his show portrays politicians as dummies. The host of the show downplays the members of the other parties, while he supports the delegates of Pakistan, Tehreek e Insaf. Because of its broad nature, this show has a large fan base (Azeem, Gillani, Hashmat, 2021). Most people in Pakistan watch these comedy shows for political information (Azeem, Gillani, Hashmat, 2021), hence, this show has a significant impact on people's political awareness. This study will look at Iqbal's shows with the goal of analyzing what components of strategic comedy are used in the concerts to shape people's perceptions in favor of Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf (PTI). Previous research did not examine this show in this manner. This viewpoint will assist individuals in viewing the other parts of the entertainment shows.

## Research Questions

1. What strategies of strategic humor are adopted in Pakistani comedy shows to propagate the desired agenda?
2. What political purposes are served through comedy shows in a Pakistani scenario?

## Methodology

The present study of humor in comedy shows has been conducted qualitatively due to the political and comic nature of the discourse available for analysis. The data has been collected from online sources available about the selected episodes of the show hosted by Aftab Iqbal. The collected data is analyzed through the lens of strategic humor theory. This concept is given by Dmitry Chernobrov (2021) in his study, *Strategic Humor: Public Diplomacy and Comic Framing of Foreign Policy Issues*. Chernobrov defines strategic humor as the use of humor by the states to interpret international events in the desired manner. The manners, like humor, are used to maximize the reach of their perspective to the domestic and international public. He explains that stories told in short, easily shareable, sarcastic, and mocking manners become more acceptable for the public. Strategic humor is also used to maximize the reach of the state's interests. He argues that humor is used to challenge the competing narrative, to embarrass, discredit, or put pressure on politicians, to expose them to ridicule, and to influence political agendas. He says that these events, through humor, are represented in such a way that they give superiority to one actor over the others. He holds the view that strategic humor creates others by targeting the groups through

humor. These groups are ridiculed and discriminated against as inferiors. One group is represented as the winner and the other as a loser. He says this technique has previously been used as political propaganda. The current study is based on this new concept of humor, as it gives great insight into understanding the political purpose of humor presented in comedy shows.

## **Analysis**

Aftab Iqbal's shows represent a good example of political propaganda through humor. These shows are less entertaining than political. The methods and strategies used in the show depict all the practices of strategic humor. The show's representation and content, one way or another, are designed in a way to influence the minds of the people. A detailed analysis of the shows through the lens of strategic humor is given in the following paragraphs.

In his shows, Iqbal discusses every small and big political incident happening in the country. These incidents are not only discussed but also interpreted in a way that suits the motives of the ruling party. Humor is used as a tool to represent these incidents in a desired manner. He glorifies the step taken by the government without any counterargument. One example from his recent shows is the episode that aired on January 16. The issue of the mini-budget is represented humorously. It is a controversial issue that is not accepted by most of the public in the country. Iqbal, on the other hand, represented it as a defeat for the opposition parties and a victory for the ruling party. A song is represented in the show that represents the helplessness of opposition parties. The lyrics of the songs are, "We are *all servants of the signals from Pindi (GHQ).*" "How can we not vote in favor of the government?" (Self translation). He tried to give the impression that the establishment and government are strong enough to force these parties to support them. Instead of talking about the consequences or advantages of the mini-budget, the incident is interpreted as a fight between the government and the opposition, which is won by the government. The opposition parties were ridiculed in the show. This serious issue is interpreted through humor in a way that the audience might take it as fun and think about the oppositional forces as the puppets of the establishment. This desired interpretation is a technique of strategic humor used by states and governments through the media to interpret controversial issues according to their interests.

The studies have proved that people are more inclined towards entertainment than hard news. People prefer watching shows that have comedy and information included. The Iqbal shows were designed with this in mind. He has combined different genres in a single show. The show has different segments, including political comedy, general knowledge, film

discussion, etc. This technique is used to maximize the audience for the show. People are mostly fed up with back-to-back hard news, so at the end of the day, they would prefer something entertaining. This has two types of advantages for media houses. The first advantage is that it increases the number of viewers for the show. This is the reason that Iqbal's show has a huge fan following. There is nothing bad in it. The second advantage that these shows yield is more problematic. Strategic humor argues that stories told in sarcastic and comic manners are more acceptable to the public. This is the thing that is cashed in by these political comedy shows. Iqbal's shows give political information to the public in a humorous manner. The dummies of the politicians are represented and asked questions about serious matters. The answers given by these dummies are funny and mostly contain misinformation. In the same show, which I discussed earlier, it is said that opposition parties had signed a deal with the establishment. The dummies of Asif Ali Zardari and Altaf Hussain were there to discuss this matter. The voice of Altaf Hussain has been ridiculed in the show. Aftab talks with Zardari's dummy and says, *"You have signed the deal with the establishment and divided the ministries among you"* (self-translation). He further says, *"You have got bail due to a deal with the establishment"* (self-translation). This information is spread in comical manners without any validity. This might be misleading for some viewers who solely depend on these comedy shows for political information. Similarly, in another episode that was broadcast on December 4, 2021, Imran Khan's dummy suggested how we can get rid of the issue of sugar and inflation. There are incorrect statistics represented in this show. For instance, the use of fifty percent less sugar can decrease its price to twenty rupees per kg. The use of public transport twice a week can decrease import bills within six months. Upon this, Aftab Iqbal replies, *"Six months is a long time; it will bring the import bill to a minimum within a month"* (self-translation). The information shared through comedy is not scrutinized; therefore, it is a regular practice of Iqbal's show to provide unauthentic information. This is done to make people favor the policies of Imran Khan and his government.

Humor serves many political purposes. It is used by comedy shows to ridicule, embarrass, and pressurize politicians. This practice is also done in Iqbal's shows. The politicians of different parties are represented by dummies. These dummies give a funny and embarrassing picture of these politicians, both physically and verbally. The non-serious discussion done by these comedians about serious matters further deteriorates the public image of the actual personalities. For example, in a show on November 4, 2016) Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's dummy is ridiculed by the host by telling him *'I know your father too'* (Self Translation). He is also called *"British Duck"* in the show. He is also represented as transgender and as an immature boy who has no command over the language. The dummy of Bilawal cannot

differentiate between masculine and feminine while speaking. Hamza Shabaz and supporters of Pakistan Muslim League N are also ridiculed in the show, which aired on August 7, 2021. He represents a professor in Hamza's public gathering and questions him, *"Why are you standing like a servant behind Hamza? It does not suit your profession"* (self-translation). He replies, *"It is an honor for me to stand here."* (Self Translation). Aftab Iqbal tries to portray that the supporters of Pakistan Muslims League N are servants of the Sharif family. He further argues that *"they will change their loyalties the moment they realize that Nawaz Sharif has become history and no longer relevant"* (self-translation). Similarly, in the show of May 17, 2021, Nawaz Sharif's face is compared to *"a peeled potato."* A dummy says, *"His face has become like a peeled potato as he stood against the establishment"* (self-translation). Iqbal openly supports the dummies, which represent anyone from Tehreek e Insaf. For instance, when Imran Khan's dummy says, *"I have nothing to lose,"* Iqbal seconds his words, *"You have nothing to lose, it is right. He will be demeaned by those who will try to remove you from power. It is your plus point. Can Nawaz say this? Can Zardari say that? He (Imran Khan) is the only one"* (Self Translation). It can be observed that politicians from other political parties are ridiculed and made fun of regularly in his shows. This is all done to serve a political purpose, which is to represent Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf and its members as a better option than others. Most of the public in Pakistan is uneducated, so they can easily be influenced by these tactics. They might create images of these politicians according to these dummy representations.

Humor can also be used by political comedy shows to counter competitive political narratives and influence political agendas. Comedy shows have political favors and agendas to serve. It has already been discussed that Iqbal, in his shows, also serves a political agenda. Every episode of the show favors the narrative of Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf over the other political parties. In a show on air on January 14, 2022, Iqbal tells the audience that if Imran Khan is ousted from power, he will be more lethal for the opposition and establishment. He asserts, *"If someone tried to oust Khan before time, Khan would be ten times more powerful and lethal"* (self-translation). The same thing is repeated by Imran Khan in his recent address. The narratives of Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf are repeatedly discussed in the shows of Iqbal. For example, in a recent episode broadcasted on January 24, 2022, Iqbal praises the *'Sehat card'*, *'Billion Tree'*, and *'Kamyab Nojwan'* initiatives and claims that Imran Khan will be remembered for these projects. He says, *"Khan Sahb, your 'Sehat Card' will immortalize you."* (Self Translation). On the other hand, projects and agendas of other parties are criticized in the shows. For example, in the September 4, 2020, show, in which Usman Buzdar's dummy was represented, they made fun of the long boots of Shahbaz Sharif during his flood visits. One person argues, *"He*



*(Usman Buzdar) is very simple. The ex-chief minister, 'coquetry one' (Shabaz Shrif), was better. I asked Buzdar to buy long boots, but we could not find his size.*" (Self Translation) Regular praise by Iqbal in his show for Pakistan, Tehreek e Insaf, clears the political agenda of this show. Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf is represented as a victorious and better option for future political decisions.

Strategic humor creates division among the groups. In political comedy shows, it is done to create differences among the parties to support a particular party. The ridiculed party and its members are represented as inferiors and losers as compared to the members of the favorite party. Iqbal also creates this rift among the political parties in Pakistan. Imran Khan and his party are represented as superior to others. For instance, in a show that was broadcasted in June 2011 and in which he interviewed Imran Khan, in the opening remarks, he establishes Imran a different and better than the others. He praises the courage of Imran Khan to become part of the show. He says, *"Imran Khan was well aware of what kind of show it is and what kind of people to face in this show, but still he insisted."* *"He is the first one to show this courage"* (self-translated). Similarly, while talking about Imran Khan's visit to the United States, he again praises Imran Khan for his dressing. He asserts, *"He (Imran) was looking like a prince. I was afraid because he and Melania were standing together, and Donald Trump was looking like a guest there"* (self-translated). While praising Imran Khan, he ridiculed Nawaz Sharif. A clip of Nawaz Sharif's meeting with Obama is used to ridicule him for using written speech and for his inappropriate body language. He talks to Nawaz Sharif's dummy, *"What were you doing during the meeting with Obama? You were reading receipts"* (self-translated). He is shown to be inferior as compared to the superior Imran Khan. Another incident more clearly unmask the biased and humiliating behavior of the host toward the opponents of Imran Khan. During the show, the female member of Iqbal's show tells him about an incident where a man refused to give his daughter's hand when another party praised Imran Khan in front of him. On listening to this incident, Iqbal calls this man *"Noon Leagya"* (member of the Pakistan Muslim League N). Without even checking the validity of the incidents, he assumes that he must be a member of this political party. This shows the biased attitude of the anchor toward the members of the other parties. This is how he creates the rift among the parties and represents Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf and its members as superior to the others. Another such example is from the show that was broadcast on May 17, 2021. In this show, Imran Khan and Usman Buzdar are represented through dummies. When Iqbal asks Imran Khan, *"Whose performance is better among all chief ministers?"* He gives Usman Buzdar's name. He tells the audience that he is the best among all the other chief ministers. Iqbal agrees with this statement and informs the audience with confidence that *"it is the reality, he is better. We can see work*

*being done only in Punjab*" (self-translation). Buzdar's performance is better than that of any other chief minister. Usman Buzdar, who is always under criticism by the public, is not only praised by the anchor but also labeled as the best. This proves that Iqbal uses all techniques of humor to propagate his political propaganda in the show.

## **Conclusion**

The current study aims to highlight the political propaganda being circulated through humor. Chernobrov's model of strategic humor has been used to analyze the data. Data is collected through the qualitative method. The study has concluded that Iqbal's show is a good example of strategic humor. It incorporates all the elements of humor to acquire its political agenda. For instance, due to its diverse nature, it has gathered a huge audience, which gives it an edge over the other political shows. He delivers his political message to his audience by using humor. It has the advantage that the things discussed in his show reach more people as compared to other shows. Furthermore, as the things told in comics are humorous, they are more acceptable to the public, so his message becomes more acceptable. He interprets serious issues in the desired manner for his political agendas. Due to the element of humor, the information shared, and interpretations made in his show are not scrutinized. He interprets the incidents accordingly for his own political goals. He openly supports Imran Khan and his party through humor. Imran Khan and his political party are represented as superior to others. Moreover, politicians of other political parties are humiliated and ridiculed in his show through dummies, which deteriorates the public image of those politicians.

This study confirms that this comic show hosted by Aftab Iqbal serves political purposes, and this show is involved in projecting a specific political leader and party by ridiculing and mimicking other parties and leaders. This show has a greater tendency to influence the young generation of Pakistan than many other serious political shows.

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**Links:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7oJ0BViMG4>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pia\\_Wh--TDU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pia_Wh--TDU)

[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=aftab+iqbal+show+and+politicians](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=aftab+iqbal+show+and+politicians)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OieT8W-9Rs>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OieT8W-9Rs>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HS8JWzp\\_vvw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HS8JWzp_vvw)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JO-9I-0O4gU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OG2LsnSe-gQ>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFclDAIYcRM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Bt7ib-LFSk&t=234s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8ZNNvWwTHw>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VrALr2dCKUQ&t=565s>