



## Cartoon war..... A political dilemma! A semiotic analysis of political cartoons

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### Abstract

The paper attempts to evaluate Pakistani political cartoons as a case study in order to increase general understanding of the structures and important features of political cartoons. Using quantitative measures, current study is the semiotic analysis of political cartoons published during the general election campaign 2013 in Pakistan. It analyses the ways cartoons were used as communicative tools on internet and print media to produce significant meaning and dominant political themes. This was a crucial time when Pakistan was marred by Taliban attacks and wanted a way forward to a new beginning. The era had also reflected the most volatile period of Pakistan's political activity among various political parties who utilized different mediums to persuade voters including print and electronic media. Furthermore, it explores the impact of cartoons on common people in the backdrop of social, political, ethical and religious milieu.

**Keywords:** *Semiotic analysis; general elections 2013; political cartoons; caricature.*

### Introduction

Cartoons have been a part of print media and political campaigns for more than last two centuries but still this genre is unsuccessful in gaining the true attention. (Diamond, 2002; p. 252) Undoubtedly, this genre adds the 'cool' image to the print media which lures

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folks. (McLuhan, 1964). Hardly anyone can ignore this medium as it is fun based way of delivering deep thoughts (Nelson, 1975) but it is difficult to determine whether one has understood the 'hidden message' or not? It needs proper background knowledge and analytical skills for that (Lent, 2000). Some cartoons are quite easy to comprehend but some are complex too.

Cartoonists use humor, satire, irony, exaggeration, labeling and analogy to express their/public opinion. Streicher (1967) contends that what in literature is 'satire', in pictorial art is 'caricature/cartoon'. Satire typically deals with demonstration and exposure of human vices or follies in order to scorn or ridicule humans; graphic caricatures ridicule pictorially. In political caricatures/cartoons, the purpose is to ridicule, debunk or expose persons, groups or organizations engaged in political or social scenario.

This genre is highly exciting to study as a small image portrays a psyche, trend, society, culture and belief. In general, this genre can be classified into two; opinion and jokes. Both of them are different and interconnected simultaneously,

'Often the distinction between the two is almost as easy to make in practice as it is in theory...Thus in modern American newspapers the cartoon of opinion is often on the editorial page, but the joke cartoons appear on other pages'. (Kemnitz, 1973)

The purpose of this case study is to establish a link between political cartoons published during election campaign 2013 and Pakistani political/cultural context i.e. what/how they create an impact on the minds of voters. Using cartoons as a medium of

communication, some humor and criticism is depicted through various genres; to establish an understanding of each political party's role, goals and purpose for future. This genre signifies and explains the concepts and constructs associations of political cartoons and the represented party.

### **Literature Review**

According to Teun Van Dijk's critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a notion of being critical in a critical science. Heterogeneity of methodological and theoretical approaches represented in this field of linguistics tend to confirm Van Dijk's point that CDA and CL (Critical Linguistics) are at most shared perspective on doing linguistic, semiotic or discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 1993, Fowler et al. 1979; Mey, 1985). Nowadays, it is used in a broader sense, denoting practical linking of social and political engagement with a sociologically informed construction of society. Generally, CDA aims to critically investigate social inequality, power structures, class conflict, and legitimization with language use (in discourse).

### **Political Cartoons:**

Political cartoons dates back from the ancient Egypt's culture 1360, B.C. where human and animal caricatures were painted on the walls then this genre travelled to Europe and other parts of the globe (Johnson, 1937; Willett, 1993). The medium of cartoons signifies political discourse climate and future plans both in politicians' personal and in national interest (Edwards, 1995). Language functions are a means of transmitting one's cognitive and social development and sharing one's specific attitude. Politics is the art of

governance and political campaign is a solemn medium of convincing and canvassing public, to impact their minds through speech, words, slogans, graffiti, caricatures and specifically cartoons. In the contemporary world, political action is prepared, accompanied, influenced and played by language and cartoons. So, it could be viewed that politicians are concerned about using language or caricature and cartoons in order to communicate with the prospect audience. The purpose of such cartoons is to inform, persuade, advertise, issue rules and regulations, and legislate mandate. These cartoons reflect the popular culture. They provide an insight into the social trends and account for how particular events make particular shared meanings for a specific social group (McLuhan, 1964).

Political cartoons observed notable importance during civil war, when artist Thomas Nast created some significant images on U.S. politics i.e. Uncle Sam, the Republican elephant and the Democratic donkey (Burns, 2007). In the American Presidential Campaigns of 2004, voters were manipulated by the same genre (Connors, 2005). The success of cartoon is in the accurate/inaccurate usage of verbal and visual ideas. Tsakona (2009) provided multimodal framework to understand the interplay of language and interaction analytically. He argues that the mechanism of cartoon analysis rests on both verbal and non-verbal devices.

Political cartoons serve four functions which include entertainment; aggression reduction; agenda-setting and framing; and specific political policy and history (DeSousa&Medhurst, 1981).  
Principle Themes in Cartoons:

Medhurst and DeSousa (1981) have provided principle themes to understand the nature of this witty genre, i.e.

- political commonplaces
- literary/cultural allusions
- personal character traits
- situational themes

These four themes cover all aims, goals and objectives of the cartoonists. Living/non-living objects are used to make any point about the daily life, academic issues, culture, politics and ongoing situations. Any idea about any walk of life can be delivered through this genre.

Specifically, cartoon is a weapon in the cartoonist's hands, who can hit whatever he feels like followed by freedom of speech (Morris, 1992).

Published cartoons are not ordinary in their nature; they change minds, make beliefs, transform ideas, guide both directly and indirectly. This is an art but needs science to be accurately sketched to be understood (Steuter et al. 2008). Politically cartoons portray voters' perceptions about politicians and vice versa (Lamb, 2004).

### **Satire in Cartoons**

Satire is a literary device used to ridicule any person, thought or situation. This is a criticism wrapped in humor which highlights weaknesses. It is abstract in nature, neither a way nor an area, it is just an idea based on the observation. But this idea serves the purpose of guarding the social and political norms by exposing faults. Political satire roots back to political cartoons, historically

(Townsend et al., 2008). English rule was criticized by using satire in political cartoons in 18th century. The same criticism on ruling party can be observed today too.

In 1984 Kuiper developed a perceptual theory to explain the nature of satire in a particular setting. Furthermore, this theory explains how readers make different interpretations out of the used satire about the politicians and others as these interpretations vary from person to person.

### **Political Cartoons as Rhetoric**

Medhurst and Desousa (1981) formed a two-level classification scheme to analyze the techniques of graphic persuasion found in a political cartoon. First is to examine the elements within the cartoon that persuade. The other scheme is based on the assumption that cartoons convey or persuade communication. Medhurst and Desousa presented a framework for macro level scheme of cartoons based on five divisions of rhetoric used to analyze oral persuasion which are as follows:

1. Invention, or discovery and the main stream topic in the subject matter
2. Disposition, the structure and arrangement of the discourse
3. Style or the appropriate use of language in graphic elements
4. Memory, or the cartoonist's grasp of content of the cartoon
5. Delivery, or the 'voice' gestures used or message conveyed

### **Analysis**

On 11<sup>th</sup> May 2013, Pakistani general elections were held for 272 National Assembly Seats and 577 Provincial Assembly Seats. Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) conducted elections in

Federal Capital Territory Islamabad, Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan, Khyber PakhtunKhuawh (KPK), Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) simultaneously except Azad Kashmir and Gilit-Baltistan due to their disputed status. PML (N, F, Q), PTI, PPP, MQM, ANP were the dominating political parties throughout the whole election process. Despite of disputed fame, the key contenders were Imran Khan, Nawaz Sharif, Bilawal Zardari (Bhutto), Asfand Yar Wali and Shujaat Hussain. Overall voter turnout remained 55.2% (<http://elections.com.pk>).

The election campaigns were carried out for around 90 days in which all leaders tried their level best to turn voter's mind in their own favor. For this purpose, parties have been observed using all possible resources for spoiling the opponents' image by hook or by crook. Banners, posters, brochures, anthems, rallies, processions, parties, dinners, lunches and meetings were conducted to fertile their winning. However, as per the sources of election commission, the overall turnout was unexpectedly less as per the expectations of election commission and politicians.

Throughout the election campaign it was difficult to assume that which party is ruling the game as almost all processions and rallies were flooded with people. Everyone, including analysts and people from all walks of life passed their personal and scripted observations about the upcoming results.

An interesting way which captured the overall campaign was the imagery used in political cartoons published on various distinct sources. The 400 cartoons selected for this study have been collected from the duration of 90 days of election campaign by using the e-

papers, Facebook and Twitter pages of Dawn, The News, Daily Observer, www.Pakdiscussionforums, <http://nativepakistan.com>, <http://pakbee.com/political-cartoon/>, [www.defence.pk/pakistanielections2013](http://www.defence.pk/pakistanielections2013). These collected cartoons are analyzed through cartoonists’ persuasive techniques i.e. symbolism, exaggeration, labeling, analogy and irony to understand a general public and political state of mind for the elections and politicians. Graphical analysis of collected cartoons is as follows

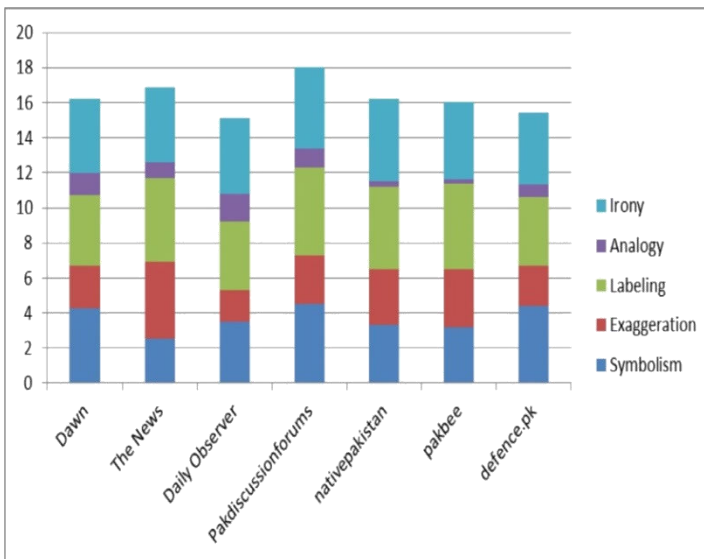


Figure 1: Persuasive techniques applied in the cartoons



## Qualitative analysis

### 1. Symbolism



Fig 1.1<sup>4</sup>



Fig 1.2<sup>5</sup>

In the collected sample the symbolism technique is noted to denote the veiled/unveiled policies and intentions of the people directly/indirectly associated with the elections. This technique is observed as a satire on the political world. For instance, Fig.1.1 is signifying the running confusion in voter's mind. He has many options in-front of him but confused in selecting the righteous, whereas green and white colors and three star pointers are representing flag of Pakistan i.e. all political parties are assuring their patriotism which causes real confusion for voters. Fig 1.2 is representing the tugging war among all leading politicians; Pakistani flag is representing the country, our people, and the intolerable and wrong approach of politicians to be in power at any cost and not ready to think for national interest.

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<sup>4</sup>[http://elections.com.pk/Political Cartoons](http://elections.com.pk/Political%20Cartoons), 15 April, 2013.

<sup>5</sup>[https://www.facebook.com/PakistaniPolitical Cartoons](https://www.facebook.com/PakistaniPoliticalCartoons), 21 March, 2013

## 2. Exaggeration:



Fig 2.1<sup>6</sup>



Fig 2.2<sup>7</sup>

The exaggeration technique is used to overdo the thoughts and this is found in various collected cartoons for amplifying characteristics to point out specific approaches. In various cartoons this technique is used to highlight difference of opinion and changing strategies. As in Fig 2.1 'young leadership' has been targeted. PTI raised this point in the beginning of their political career which undoubtedly had worked a lot for them because cricket lovers found no way out except blindly following their favorite cricketer turned politician. And by following their footprints other political parties exhibit themselves wearing this 'young leadership' mask as it was considered as the fashion of time but in reality they ridiculed this idea.

While Fig 2.2 depicts Fakhruddin G. Ibrahim, the chief election commissioner, with a difficult task of conducting smooth, fair and free elections by an analogy of a road with infinite twists and turns.

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<sup>6</sup><http://epaper.pakobserver.net/201509/34/>

<sup>7</sup>[www.pakistanelections2013.com/](http://www.pakistanelections2013.com/), March 27, 2013

### 3. Labeling



Fig 3.1<sup>8</sup>



Fig 3.2<sup>9</sup>



Fig 3.3<sup>10</sup>

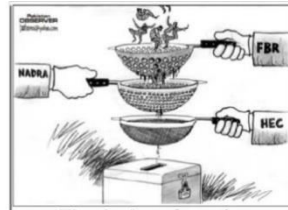


Fig 3.4<sup>11</sup>

Labeling is spotted in the study where cartoonists clearly claim what they think and believe. In some cartoons bubbles are used to explain the approach whereas in some cartoons human organs and other objects are named to make specific points. In Fig 3.1, Iftikhar Chowdhry, the most controversial Chief Justice in the history of Pakistan, is criticized for having dual nature and masked face. Though he was not directly connected to the elections but served as an important claim for PML-N to prove their honesty. Fig3.2 is a

<sup>8</sup><http://www.pakistanelections2013.com>, March 20, 2013

<sup>9</sup><http://www.pakbee.com/>, February 13, 2013

<sup>10</sup>Pakistan Observer, 25th April, 2013

<sup>11</sup>Pakistan Observer, 7<sup>th</sup> April, 2013

depiction of politicians' Islamic knowledge that they do not know the basics even but entitle themselves as a true Muslim. In Fig 3.3 Imran Khan is shown posing himself with beard in Islamization frame just to satisfy fundamental countrymen because other parties criticize him for conducting processions-cum-concerts. The reason of such portrayal is a sudden change in IK's speeches and moves due to the major criticism he faced during elections for not having any Islamic approach. Fig 3.4 is a taunt on the legal binding for an election candidate to be virtuous and innocent as per Federal Board of Revenue (FBR), Higher Education Commission (HEC) and National Database and Registration Authority's (NADRA) records. This signifies Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) filtering the politicians by stating numerous candidates as 'ineligible' due to the discrepancy between their own and official records. Various candidates were stopped from taking part in elections because of their criminal background; some were stopped for not fulfilling graduate qualification or fake degrees and some due to their identity related issues.

#### 4. Analogy

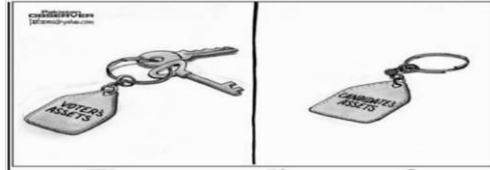


Fig 4.1<sup>12</sup>

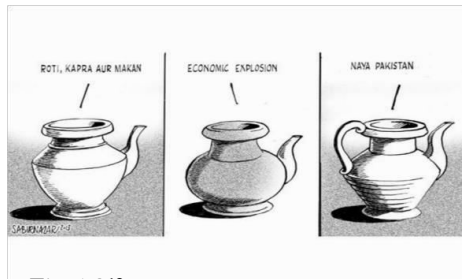


Fig 4.2<sup>13</sup>

This technique illustrates comparison between ideas, objects and approaches. The technique is observed when cartoonists' compared two or more objects to feature some idea. It is also noted as sarcasm on the societal, economic and political norms and attitudes. Fig 4.1 is representing the easy and impossible access to a common man and politicians' assets respectively. Hiding possessions during election processes is very usual among all politicians and its reason is nothing else except convincing voters about their root similarities.

Fig 4.2 is comparing a very famous character/part of Pakistani politicians' activities i.e. Lota (cheater, who keeps on changing

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<sup>12</sup> Pakistan Observer, April 14, 2013, p.4

<sup>13</sup> www.defence.pk, April 13 2013

favors). Here cartoonist has compared 'Lotas', means not a single party is free of cheaters. The label of 'Naya Pakistan' is PTI's slogan, 'Roti, KapraaurMakan' is PPP's slogan and 'Economic Explosion' is PML-N's slogan. The cartoon depicts that all political parties are cheaters as they keep on turning their coats for their personal interests.

## 5. Irony

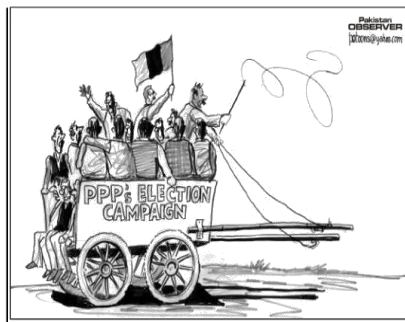


Fig 5.1<sup>14</sup>



Fig 5.2<sup>15</sup>



Fig 5.3<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Pakistan Observer, 27th April, 201

<sup>15</sup> Pakistan Observer, 12th April, 2013

<sup>16</sup> <http://pakdiscussionforums/politicalcartoons>, 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2013

Irony shows the difference of reality with their actual expectation i.e. how they are? And how they should be? Fig 5.1 is showing a pity of PPP that they have everything except the leader. After Benazir Bhutto's assassination, Asif Zardari came into the political scene by using a 'will', about which countrymen and political parties including PPP holds doubts.

Fig 5.2 is expressing a blind shower of party tickets. It is denoting that there is no mechanism for party ticket distribution. Party tickets are distributed without any considerations which hampers the way to genuine democracy.

Fig 5.3 is showing elections as a wild goose chase generally mistrusted as fixed. So, the election practice is supposed nothing else except an attempt to fool masses.

### **Conclusion**

Political cartoons have now become an important part of the political activities because people enjoy imagining the whole story by just seeing a small representation. It is a fun based activity relied on the creative abilities of the cartoonist who is from the same stream. Semiotics is the science of understanding the image and symbolic art. Signs have meanings and their analysis is rooted in denotation (literal) and connotation (symbolic) meanings. Both of these techniques are demonstrated by sketching implicit and explicit ideas in the collected sample.

Techniques implied by cartoonists verify the first hypothesis which reads that 'all political activities can be covered in cartoons'. Politicians' disabilities, cheat, and their dual faces are cartooned. Techniques of symbolism, exaggeration, analogy, irony and labeling

are used to highlight any specific move. Instead of the regular cartoon collection from daily newspapers, some pages are found on facebook and twitter with various political cartoon posts and a column is also observed on the official website of ECP including all story-telling cartoons. The frequency of cartoons show how this genre is gaining popularity due to its social and official recognition which endorses second hypothesis 'status of political cartoons on both social and official level'.

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