

POLICY BRIEF

February 2022

The Backlash Effects of Media Liberalization: Evidence from Pakistan

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Preview of the Findings

- How does media liberalization affect support for religious institutions in Islamic nations like Pakistan? Two effects are possible. On the one hand, exposure to secular content may dampen adherence to strict religious norms. On the other hand if the new content is considered offensive to Islamic norms, it could create a 'backlash' effect, precipitating support for religious institutions.
- This study addresses this question in the context of Pakistan's dramatic media liberalization of

2002, through which the country transitioned from having a single, state-controlled radio station with culturally conservative content, to a decentralized network of hundreds of private stations broadcasting diverse content, including foreign content from the United States and India.

- The empirical analysis leverages a unique radio licensing regulation that restricted private stations from broadcasting beyond 50km of the radio tower. Spatial regression discontinuity design, in conjunction with fine-grained data from polling stations and villages is used to study the effects of access to private radio.
- The preliminary results show that communities just inside the 50km radius were more likely to vote for religious parties and had higher enrolments in religious schools (madrasas) than communities just outside the 50km boundary. The results suggest that the introduction of foreign, liberal content provoked backlash, resulting in greater support for culturally conservative institutions.

Motivation behind the study

Over the past three decades, state control of media in Muslim countries has eroded rapidly, through the rise of multinational television networks such as Al Jazeera, the spread of radio services such as BBC World Service and Voice of America, and the growth of the Internet (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2008). Where broadcast media had historically been carefully controlled by central authorities, new media sources have diversified public access to information on news, politics, entertainment, and culture (Rugh, 2004).

The liberalization and diversification of mass media has created tension in many Muslim societies. New media often features content that contradicts Islamic religious norms, for instance by depicting alcohol consumption and sexual interactions between men and women. This tension can be seen in a recent survey of six Islamic countries (Dennis et al., 2014), where two thirds of respondents reported consuming media from non-Islamic countries, but over 70% also believed entertainment should be regulated for violence and romantic content, and whole programs banned if people find them offensive.

Given these tensions, what are the consequences of media liberalization on cultural and religious behaviour? On the one hand, if exposure to diversified media leads individuals to emulate more liberal social norms (Jensen and Oster, 2009; Chong and Ferrara, 2009), this could lead to less cultural conservatism. On the other hand, if the content is distasteful and contradicts prevailing cultural values, it may generate 'backlash,' causing people to demonstrate more culturally conservative behaviour (Bisin and Verdier, 2001; Wheaton, 2020) and boost their support for religious institutions. But whether the emulation or backlash effect dominates is theoretically ambiguous.

Since its independence in 1947, the Pakistani state has had monopoly over television and radiobroadcasting, thus managing and controlling the flow of information. Under the dictatorship regime of General Pervez Musharraf in 2002, the media was liberalized. Under this liberalization episode, the country went from having one government-owned radio station, to hundreds of private radio stations airing diverse content, including foreign content from countries like India and the U.S., which depict social norms that are more liberal than traditional Islamic norms. The policy shift was sudden and unanticipated because it ran contrary to the popular perception that it is in the interest of dictatorships to retain stringent control over media and information flow.

About the study

This study examines potential cultural responses to the content delivered by private radio stations. Conceptually, there are two feasible responses. First, exposure to private radio may lead to less cultural conservatism if individuals emulate liberal norms depicted on these stations. The paper labels this as the emulation effect. For example, if individuals adapt more liberal norms, they may prefer to steer away from supporting religious political parties and vote instead for secular parties. Or parents may choose to send their children to secular state schools instead of religious madrasas.

Alternatively, the content of private radio could generate backlash, and more cultural conservatism, if the content is viewed as offensive or at odds with Islamic norms. This is labelled the backlash effect. Qualitative accounts suggest that religious hardliners in Pakistan have repeatedly responded negatively to the introduction of liberal media content, for example, by cracking down on those who choose to consume western media.

The empirical analysis sets out to determine which effect is dominant in the context of Pakistan. The analysis exploits an unusual restriction on private radio licenses in Pakistan: when the Musharraf regime allowed private radio stations to begin operating, it also imposed the restriction that the private stations could only broadcast signal up to 50km from the radio towers, and regulated the technical characteristics of the radio towers accordingly. As a result, locations within 50 km of a private radio station have access to both the government station and the private radio stations, while locations outside this 50 km boundary continue to have access only to the government radio station.

Using a spatial regression discontinuity (RD) design, the study compares post-liberalization outcomes in locations just inside the 50 km boundary (which have access to private radio) to locations just outside the 50km boundary (which lack access to private radio), while controlling for distance to the 50km boundary and other geographic variables. Using fine-grained data from several different sources, the paper verifies that geographic, social and economic characteristics preceding radio liberalization do not change discontinuously at the boundary.

Findings

The analysis highlights two main results, which both provide evidence of backlash effects. First, using spatially

granular voting data from thousands of polling stations in Pakistan's 2018 general election, the paper finds that religious party vote shares are higher in locations just inside the boundary than just outside. In provincial elections, an increase in vote shares for both Sunni parties as well as Shia parties and their Coalition partners is seen; but in national elections, increases in vote shares are specific to Sunni parties. These results suggest that the liberalized media environment leads to greater support for all types of religious parties when issues are localized (as in provincial elections); but national, foreign policy considerations (such as Shia parties supporting Iran) place some limitations on increased support for this latter group of political parties in national elections.

Second, using nationwide household survey data from 1,000 distinct villages over 2012-2014, the analysis shows that households just inside the boundary are more likely to enroll their children in madrasas - religious schools with unregulated curricula which focus on Quranic study. In addition, the effects on madrasa enrollment are larger for male children than for female children. This may be an indication that the cultural response to the liberalized media environment is larger among poorer segments of society, as male madrasas are universally free and thus draw boys from poor families, while female madrasas also draw girls from middle class families. Both these findings, on religious party vote share and madrasa enrollment, suggest that backlash effects dominate emulation in shaping cultural responses to media liberalization in Pakistan.

Policy recommendations

These results highlight two implications for policymakers.

First, they suggest that exposure to media content can help shape political views and economic behaviors, and policymakers should be aware of these responses in setting policies that guide media broadcast. The discontinuous response to private media across the 50 km threshold was likely an unanticipated consequence of the regulatory policy to allow private stations to broadcast up to the 50 km from radio towers. Anticipating responses along these lines may help the state to make informed decisions media broadcast, or guide watchdog groups in supporting or opposing particular broadcast policies.

Second, to the extent that exposure to private media produces backlash effects, government may need to set complementary policies to offset these effects and achieve desired policy objectives in areas exposed to private radio. For example, if the state aims to promote state-based schooling or diminish the influence of religious schooling, the results from this paper suggest that additional policies will be needed to promote government schooling and offset increased enrollment in madrasas observed within the 50 km boundary. This is particularly germane to the Pakistani institutional context, where the government has been attempting to regulate, reform and rationalize the madrasa sector over the course of the past two years.

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