Do-it-Yourself Activism in Pakistan: The Fatal Celebrity of Qandeel Baloch

Zainab B. Alam

In July 2016, Pakistani social media celebrity Qandeel Baloch was asphyxiated by her brother and gained posthumous celebrity in the West where her death was sensationally categorized as an honor-killing. Yet Qandeel was a celebrity in her own right among South Asians long before her death. Through skillful use of social media, she created new forms of public space and used them to challenge dominant social norms and political practices. I examine Qandeel's "do-it-yourself activism"—her innovative use of the digital public sphere to position herself as a worthy representative of Pakistani nationality; to critique long-established norms governing gender, class, and sexuality; and to expand the boundaries of national belonging in Pakistan to include culturally rebellious women of limited economic means. By examining Qandeel's audacious means of standing for Pakistan, her deployment of marriage proposals as a mode of subversive political activism within the political party, *Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf* (Pakistan Movement for Justice, PTI), and her use of visual culture ("selfies") to challenge the moral authority of a powerful Islamic cleric, I theorize a form of political activism grounded in women's agency that deploys celebrity to illuminate and politicize injustices.

On March 8, 2018, women in major cities across Pakistan celebrated International Women's Day by participating in *Aurat March* (women's march for justice). In the week preceding the march, the official Twitter account of the protest profiled one famous female activist every day (AuratMarch2018 2018). Social media celebrity Qandeel Baloch, a 26-year-old woman who had been murdered by her brother two years earlier, was honored on March 4. Sometimes called Pakistan's "Kim Kardashian," Qandeel is not typically recognized as an advocate for social justice (Zubair 2017). Following a classic Orientalist trope, she is far more frequently positioned as a victim of injustice. Qandeel's brutal death circulates in the West as the sign of her celebrity— as indicated by Prime Minister Theresa May's comments in the British House of Commons about this heinous "honor killing" (Hughes 2016). Yet the pervasive adoption of Qandeel masks by young women during *Aurat March* 2018 (figure 1) suggests dimensions of Qandeel's celebrity that are routinely missed both inside and outside Pakistan (Bashir 2018). Through a feminist analysis of Qandeel's self-fashioning online, intentional cultivation of a fan base, and calculated subversion of entrenched cultural and religious norms, I examine a form of gendered digital celebrity politics unrecognized by mainstream scholars of politics and social media.

Fouzia Azeem's Reinvention as Qandeel

Unlike the privileged Armenian-American Kardashian family and most Pakistani celebrities who hail from elite, urban backgrounds, Fouzia Azeem came from a poor, rurally-based family (Nawab and Chaudry 2017). A model and a part-time actress, she first entered the mainstream media spotlight in late 2013. Using the stage-name Qandeel Baloch, she appeared on the televised singing competition *Pakistan Idol,* where her audition was portrayed so badly that she gained fame for the comic nature of her performance (Perry and Saifi 2016). Rejected by the show's celebrity judges as a failed entertainer, she soon voiced her disapproval of their decision on social media and gained a modest following, which she subsequently cultivated as a fan base that would catapult her to celebrity status (Boone 2016). Over the next two-and-a-half years, she gained a large following on social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, through thousands of posts, including, most famously, her

Zainab Alam is a Doctoral Candidate in Political Science at Rutgers University, focusing on women and politics and comparative politics (Zainab.alam@rutgers.edu). Her current research centers on digitally-enabled political participation in the context of South Asia.

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Figure 1
A Qandeel mask worn at the 2018 Aurat March

Source: Bashir 2018.

selfies (Baloch 2016a). In a mix of Urdu and choppy English, readily understood by hundreds of thousands of social-media savvy South Asian men and women, she spoke and sang to her followers (Masood 2018).

During her life, Qandeel was often dismissed because of her exaggerated displays of emotion and her non-elite background. She was portrayed as an attention-seeking spectacle, not a serious political actor. Her rise to fame was far from apolitical, however. For those who understood her idiom, Qandeel excelled in the innovative use of digital media to articulate political critiques of established gender relations, class hierarchies, political orders, and religious authorities. She also used her celebrity for redistributive ends. With the income she made from her social media fame she supported a dozen people in her village, a highly unusual development in a country where upward mobility is typically inaccessible for the working class. These aspects of her celebrityhood help explain why *Aurat March* organizers proclaimed that protest participants would "march in [her] spirit" (AuratMarch2018 2018).

I analyze Qandeel's social media interventions as a form of gendered do-it-yourself activism (DIYA), designed to critique entrenched hierarchies in Pakistan. This form of innovative activism, which relies heavily on audio-visual content, arises in a context where there is increasingly limited space for dissent, where mainstream media is strictly censored, and notions of public femininity are heavily regulated by both social norms and institutions. Qandeel's DIYA is particularly salient as a subversive politics orchestrated by a young woman from a marginalized community who used social media to manifest new forms of political agency in Pakistan. Her activism was dependent on her celebrity status, yet she also defied celebrity norms, flaunting her autonomy to contest social, political, and religious conventions and to advocate social change.

To appreciate Qandeel's innovative political activism, it is important to situate her interventions in relation to discussions of social media as a mode of political action, which typically focus on the global North, and to analyses of celebrity culture and politics in Pakistan, which focus primarily on elite men. Toward that end, I begin with a brief review of scholarly claims about the nature and scope of virtual politics and how those claims play out in Pakistan, particularly regarding celebrity actors and civic engagement. I then examine "Three Acts" that exemplify Qandeel's do-it-yourself activism to demonstrate how her social media postings enact a novel mode of political performance that aspires to promote social justice. Interpreting her life and death in this larger context of Pakistani women's social justice efforts, I identify how this do-it-yourself activism was uniquely forged by a young woman to politicize inequalities grounded in class, ethnicity, gender, and modes of political and religious respectability in a highly repressive state.

Social Media as a Mode of Political Action

Pippa Norris (2007, 628) describes *political activism* as "the ways that citizens participate, the processes that lead them to do so, and the consequences of these acts." In the early twenty-first century with the emergence of Web 2.0 —the participative technology that includes social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter, blogging software, and video sharing such as YouTube— the Internet became a prime site for new modes of civic engagement. A growing body of scholarship investigates how individuals, who have the economic and geopolitical privilege to access digital spaces, are using social media to express political views, mobilize collective action, and disseminate politically-charged images, stories, news, and memes (Norris 2001; Rainie et al. 2012; Agarwal et al. 2014). In exploring digitally-enabled communication, some scholars examine how individuals' online messaging connects with and helps mobilize larger collective action,

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but gender is seldom considered in these works (Bennett and Serberg 2012). Others have studied how political parties and campaign organizations target particular voters, raise funds, and recruit volunteers in support of particular candidates. Early studies portrayed new media as an agent of democratization. As a free space that affords limitless potential for creative and collaborative communication and interaction and unparalleled access to information, the Internet was characterized as a mechanism to empower citizens, groups, and communities. Yet information and communication technology also enables modes of surveillance unimaginable in the twentieth century—allowing states to track the movement of citizens, monitor online usage, and track Web traffic across a vast array of sites. Within cyberspace, the values of openness, transparency, user choice, and public accountability coexist with disinformation, manipulation, deceit, cyberracism, cybersexism, cyberbullying, and cyber stalking (Chadwick 2010).

Matt Ratto and Megan Boler (2014) conceptualized *do-it-yourself* political activity as an innovative use of digital media platforms for individual political expression. They emphasize that varieties of virtual expression are multifaceted, that individualized styles of expression are detachable from collective action movements, and that *DIY citizens* may prefer individualized methods of protest to coordinated campaigns. Coining the term "*DIY citizenship,*" John Hartley suggests a form of engagement that is heavily centered on an actor's identity—an identity that is not necessarily tethered to existing relations between "state and subject" (Hartley 2002). Indeed, Hartley notes that *DIY citizens* cultivate a neoliberal sense of agency as "a choice people can make for themselves" (Hartley 2002, 178). Hartley's adoption of the terminology of *citizens* and *citizenship* echoes the early optimism about the democratizing potential of digital media, and emphasizes that new media has fewer barriers to entry compared to more traditional media (Karpf 2010). Yet as Ratto and Boler (2014) point out, this understanding of DIY citizenship relies on a liberal conception of the self-determining individual and does not consider societal power dynamics that severely constrain the freedom of expression of certain groups—most notably those marginalized by class, gender, and minority status.

Ratto and Boler redefine DIY citizenship as "a twenty-first-century amalgamation of politics, culture, arts, and technology that in turn constitutes identities rooted in diverse making practices" (2014, 18). They specify that these "making practices" are inherently *critical* in nature, enabling substantive interventions that illuminate cultural, structural, and institutional systems of power. Although this account provides a helpful point of departure for an analysis of Qandeel's digital activism, Ratto and Boler themselves do not include any empirical materials from non-Western contexts or consider how online critiques may be complicated in the context of illiberal societies. Despite mentioning whistleblower Edward Snowden and the "Arab Spring" in their foreword and introductory remarks, Ratto and Boler do not include any essays on direct political participation via social media in their volume. They simply acknowledge that civic engagement of a DIY nature is undertheorized and understudied (Ratto and Boler 2014, 26).

As my discussion of Qandeel's DIYA will illuminate, what counts as an actor's political intervention and as "critical making practices" in an open society may differ dramatically from those developed in an illiberal context with more limits on freedom of expression. This vital difference is relevant to Ratto and Boler's conception of the DIY *citizen* as a continuous variable "with one end representing the overtly political/interventionist and the other end representing those simply channeling creativity and a kind of *poesis* into everyday practices" (2014, 19). In contexts of political repression, DIY citizens may engage in critical identity-making practices that appear to be far less continuous with established political action or accredited modes of citizenship.

To mark the constraints that persist on political engagement in Pakistan, then, I focus on *DIY activism* (DIYA) as a subset of this innovative, digitally-enabled DIY citizenship, but as a political engagement more actively trying to gain the attention of the state. So, whereas the category of DIY citizen would include someone who might help build a webpage for a new political party behind the scenes, a DIY activist, more prominently cultivates unique modes of protest engaging the state and its institutions in an interventionary manner.

Digital Activism in Pakistan

In Pakistan, as in the global North, those who can afford to access the Internet have used social media for multiple political ends, taking advantage of lower barriers to entry and avoiding stronger state restrictions on traditional media (Hussain 2017; Murthy and Longwell 2013). In 2007, for instance, social media protests were launched in response to media blackouts in Pakistan. According to Saman Talib (2011), "the conscious and motivated use of new digital media and communications such as mobile phone cameras, blogs and websites [created and maintained] a cohesive and non-partisan movement against dictatorship and for democratic rights" (cited in Banaji 2011, 19). Relatedly, in 2014 the up-and-coming opposition party, the *Pakistani-Tehreek-e-Insaaf* (Pakistan Movement for Justice, PTI), used social media to mobilize multi-city protest marches contesting electoral corruption (Aziz 2017). PTI encouraged *Azaadi* (Freedom) March protestors to share rally information widely and used the hashtag #azaadimarch to evade government censorship of these activities. Thousands of party supporters joined this effort in an unprecedented manifestation of political protest (Aziz 2017).

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The openness of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram encourage individuals to be innovative when it comes to civic practices (Loader and Mercea 2011). As Fatima Aziz (2017) notes, smartphone-using PTI supporters found new ways to perform citizenship: self-publishing Instagram-selfies to show their support for opposition party leader Imran Khan and documenting their participation in the 2014 Azaadi March. Expressive behavior on the Internet's self-publishing platforms expands the meaning of *do-it-yourself* (DIY) citizenship, as individuals launch creative projects online, which had previously been undertaken only by professionals. With smartphone-affordability on the rise, online spaces are becoming increasingly accessible. Lower cost thresholds for entry have implications for citizen activism and other forms of political participation, especially for dissenting voices that are prevented from accessing traditional mass media in Pakistan (Mitchell 2017). Young, urban, middle-to-upper class citizens in Pakistan increasingly use cyberspace to express themselves politically, and more recently, have used social media to mobilize protests in support of the country's marginalized (Zia 2012; Khilji 2018).

Qandeel's use of social media arises in this context, but her transformation from DIY citizen to DIY activist is also linked to unique aspects of Pakistani public spheres. Not only are private mainstream media channels in Pakistan subject to censorship by the government, but social media platforms are routinely monitored and sometimes blacked-out for religious or culturally "inappropriate" content (Masood 2018). In addition, the public sphere in Pakistan remains classed and gendered. Despite its electoral promises to make a "new Pakistan," the PTI government that came to power in 2018 has done little to alter the near monopoly of power by affluent men. Most Pakistani women and minorities have limited access to the bourgeois public sphere theorized by Habermas (1989), where citizens gather as private persons to debate and discuss matters of public concern. As Nancy Fraser (1990) has emphasized, the liberal Habermasian "public" conceptualized citizens as male and contemporary societies continue to be stratified by systems of class, gender, and racial oppression, which are often ignored by mainstream scholars. Minority subjects confront multiple forms of exclusion from public debate, exclusions that are intensified for women who are subjected to threats and censure when they move outside the private sphere. Mediated by religiously conservative gatekeepers who make decisions about entry based on class, ethnicity, religion and gender, the public sphere in Pakistan is often inaccessible to voices that seek to challenge the status quo (Jafar 2005).

In addition, many women confront barriers to their mobility in public spaces in Pakistan. As Aziz (2017, 27) points out, "independent female participation in public demonstrations is [typically] limited to professionals such as lawyers and politicians." Although women have been markedly present in PTI campaign rallies, their movement in such spaces is usually limited by household elders unless such participation is a family activity (Aziz 2017). Hence, where there are social, economic, and political challenges to Pakistani women's public visibility and mobility, social media provides alternate spaces for self-expression and political critique that confound the public-private divide.

Women in Pakistan also confront profound social conservatism that manifests not only in the policing and censorship of women in public life, but in the demand for subordination in the private sphere, where many live within extended family systems typically headed by the eldest male. In a culture where the public and the private spheres are male-dominated, women are positioned as guardians of family values and tradition (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987). As a consequence, social and religious conservatives often police women's social media use. Family members may restrict online postings, while other men troll cyberspace, harassing women who dare to post unconventional content. For this reason, women may choose to create private and semi-anonymous social media accounts, using avatars and online personalities to mask their identities (Aziz 2017). In addition to the risks of surveillance by state agencies and Internet corporations documented by Hintz, Dencik, and Wahl-Jorgensen (2017), in Pakistan cyberspace is also unofficially monitored by social police who can place very real limits on voices that go against the grain.

Although Qandeel may not have understood fully the risks of being publicly contentious on virtual platforms, she was keenly aware of the potential of these virtual spaces to establish global networks that would provide an audience for her DIYA. She used her digital agency not only for upward mobility, but also for political protest, challenging the status quo pertaining to gender, sexuality, and religion in Pakistan. Qandeel's DIYA was conditioned on her celebrity status, a popularity-based social capital that she painstakingly acquired through cyber performances of self-fashioning. To gauge the significance of her accomplishment in this domain, it is important to consider the nature of celebrity politics in Pakistan.

Celebrity Politics in Pakistan

Since independence, two political families have dominated politics in Pakistan (the Sharifs, leaders of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, and the Bhuttos, leaders of the Pakistan People's Party). Entrenchment of these family dynasties has made it difficult for newcomers or outsiders to enter formal politics. In 2013, seeking to change this dynastic rule, Imran Khan, the current Prime Minister of Pakistan, made his first unsuccessful run for this office (BBC News 2018). As a world-famous cricket player who led Pakistan's team to win the World Cup in 1992, Khan is often referred to as *Kaptaan* by supporters

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who extrapolate his ability to lead the nation from his performance as cricket team captain. Khan founded the PTI in 1996. By 2013, Khan's popularity as a candidate transformed the PTI into the second largest political party in the country, shifting the balance of power that had been in place for decades (BBC News 2018b). Although Khan is a philanthropist who, among other efforts, established the country's largest cancer hospital in 1994, his political rise is underpinned by his fame as a former cricketer. Likely due to their "apolitical" ascent to national prominence, sports figures are among the most influential celebrities in Pakistan, followed by entertainment-industry celebrities and politicians (Baig and Siddiqui 2012).

Recent scholarship has attempted to investigate the routes to power and effects of celebrities, like Khan, who become involved in formal politics (e.g., West and Orman 2003; Van Zoonen 2005; 't Hart and Tindall 2009; Wheeler 2013; Wood, Corbett and Flinders 2016). Darrell West and John Orman (2003), for example, have identified five types of "celebrity politicos:" political newsworthies, legacies (from political families), famed politicos (elected to office on merit), famed nonpoliticos (non-office-seeking advocates), and celebrities who gain fame through events. Mark Wheeler (2013) points out, however, that this categorization ignores political agency and fails to show the relationship between popular culture and the sphere of politics. Wheeler also criticizes Paul 't Hart and Karen Tindall's taxonomy (2009), which distinguishes "long-term celebrity advocates, celebrity endorsers, celebrity politicians, and politicians-turned-celebrity" as key types within the realm of celebrity politics (Wheeler 2013, 23). Wheeler notes that in limiting their analysis to the ways that celebrities engage formal political institutions and parties, 't Hart and Tindall (2009) do not give enough weight to the role of the entertainment industry. P. David Marshall (2014, 6) concurs, emphasizing that entertainers create an aura of *public intimacy*: "celebrity status invokes the message of possibility of a democratic age . . . the celebrity, in this sense, is not distant but attainable and touchable by the multitudes."

In celebrity politics, much like electoral politics, successful actors strive to burnish their image and maintain their fan base, which constrains the scope of their undertakings. Typically, celebrities avoid issues that would be deemed controversial by their publics. Scholars who analyze "branding" have shown how a marketing technique initially designed to enhance consumption and consumer loyalty has been converted into political capital by celebrities who champion issues popular with their base such as anti-trafficking or HIV/AIDS prevention (e.g. Turner 2013). Other scholars document how celebrity roles as spokespeople for charities, philanthropic ideas, and humanitarian concerns can translate into political opportunities or social movement activism (Tarrow 2005). Yet celebrity activists who operate in these modes tend to concentrate on issue awareness and fundraising, assiduously avoiding controversial political topics that might limit their appeal (Tsaliki, Frangonikolopoulos, and Huliaras 2013). Only a few studies explore celebrity involvement in protest politics. Sarah Jackson (2014), for example, probes the role of African American celebrities in public debate in relation to their historical exclusion from political life and the racially biased depictions that persist in mainstream American media. Studies of the trajectory of black celebrities in the United States are rare, however, as most scholars continue to focus on wealthy white individuals (Cashmore 2012). Beyond the United States, celebrity studies are particularly preoccupied with the global North.

Turning his attention to the global South, Nahuel Ribke (2015) is a notable exception. Ribke contrasts the nature of the celebrity and the routes to power of musician Gilberto Gil from Brazil and Argentinian businessman Juan Carlos Blumberg. Gil, a racial minority (Afro-Brazilian) and a well-known singer, guitarist, and song-writer, who had been imprisoned by the military junta for nine months and subsequently expelled from the country, ran for local office after returning from exile, served as a member of the city council and as a city commissioner, and was later appointed Brazil's Minister for Culture in Lula da Silva's government. Although he was only the second black to hold a cabinet position in Brazil, Gil was well educated and from a privileged background. His principled stands against the military dictatorship also added to his political capital when he entered electoral politics. By contrast, Blumberg was thrust into celebrity-hood after his son was kidnapped and murdered in Argentina (Ribke 2015, 138). Blumberg's advocacy of "law and order" made him popular among right-wing political and ideological leaders, who sensationalized his son's murder to advance their own critiques of the government. Although Ribke's analysis of these cases has the virtue of addressing celebrity politics within former authoritarian and democratizing regimes, these two celebrities still embodied economic and gender privilege. As an award-winning musician, Gil further benefitted from a pervasive tendency to bestow favorite-son status on entertainers who win international recognition, thereby burnishing the national image.

In the postcolonial South Asian subcontinent, a celebrated entertainer is often seen as a national representative (Rao 2009). Early Indian films were rife with symbolism about nationhood and national identity. Following partition, Pakistan also fostered film and music industries to rival India's, making these new (male and female) entertainment celebrities' icons of national pride. Whether by winning major sports victories for the nation or by achieving a star quality that is taken to embody national identity, celebrities in South Asia have considerable social, economic, and political capital to deploy.

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As a woman from a poor village living in a nation that strictly polices women's presence in public and private life, Qandeel lacked social, economic, and political capital. Yet she used social media to reinvent herself—and in so doing, she achieved celebrity status, which she used to critique multiple vectors of power that oppress impoverished women. Examining how she accomplished these feats affords insights into forms of political agency, cyber celebrity, and virtual politics that have been little studied.

A Note on Methodology

Although Qandeel's life ended at age 26, rich visual and textual materials provide clues to the meaning of her unorthodox political interventions. Qandeel has been the subject of an Urdu-language TV series and a biography, as well as multiple popular culture and journalistic accounts written in both Urdu and English (Ajaz 2018; Maher 2018). These materials provide details of her life, but do not construe her social media activity as a mode of political engagement.

Any scholar seeking to analyze the political meaning of Qandeel's virtual performances confronts several significant challenges. The government blocked her most controversial social media posts and closed her Facebook and Instagram accounts after her death. Thus, it is no longer possible to view the complete corpus of Qandeel's online interventions. The photos and videos that continue to circulate online have been selectively incorporated into other websites by fans, journalists, scholars, and outside observers who deem them significant enough to save. These judgments of significance may or may not correspond to Qandeel's own assessment of her works. I am interested both in the content (textual and visual) of her digital self-fashioning and how her online interventions were discussed by fans, bloggers, journalists in the Pakistani news media, religious authorities, and state actors. My object of investigation, then, is Qandeel as observer and observed.

For this analysis, I selected a sample of Qandeel's original social media postings from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. To track how Qandeel's activism was portrayed by fans and journalists, I focused on audio-visual sources that had been both reposted by her followers *and* discussed formally or informally in Urdu and English newspaper and television reporting about Qandeel published between 2013 and 2018. My audio-visual sample included sixty-five images of Qandeel (including thirty-three selfies), twelve selfie-style videos made by Qandeel and ten Urdu-language televised interviews or live shows where Qandeel was the main guest. Utilizing the webpage organizing tool Instapaper, I surveyed 504 online Urdu news articles (primarily from *Daily Jang* and *Daily Pakistan)* and 1,690 articles from online English-language Pakistani, Indian, British, and American news sources (primarily from *The Express Tribune, Pakistan Today, Geo News, Dawn.com, Samaa TV, Times of India, Hindustan Times, The Guardian, BBC News, The New York Times,* and *CNN*). This selection of materials enabled me to construct a chronological and geopolitical social media-based portrait of Qandeel that contrasts her self-presentation during her life with fan reception and journalistic treatment of those presentations. These juxtapositions help illuminate Qandeel's political agency—and how it has been misconstrued by observers since her death.

Critical discourse analysis is particularly well suited to interrogate multi-media visual and textual materials since it makes no pretense to capture authorial intention. Informed by notions of ideology critique developed in the Frankfurt School, critical discourse analysis suggests that words and images convey conventional meanings—even as they may attempt to disrupt those conventions (Van Djik 1993). By examining Qandeel's social media self-presentation, its reception by multiple audiences, and recurring negotiations between activist, audiences, and authorities, I illuminate the construction of a form of celebrity political agency that is grounded in protest. Contention and controversy were Qandeel's medium and her message. By probing both, I suggest that we can gain important insights about a young woman celebrity-turned-activist and about classed/gendered realities of citizen activism and politics in Pakistan.

Qandeel's Do-it-Yourself-Activism in Pakistan

Act I: Claiming National Identity

As Nira Yuval Davis (1997) so cogently demonstrated, women are far more likely to be cast as reproducers of the nation (physically, culturally, symbolically) than as representatives of the nation. Modal citizenship continues to be gendered, as male and female reproductive roles impose moral and behavioral strictures to ensure the purity of the nation. Qandeel's first act of "critical making," key to her do-it-yourself activism, was to proclaim herself *Pakistani*—a worthy representative of the nation. Within Pakistan, many citizens who are religious and ethnic minorities are othered as *non-Pakistani* by the mass public. Religious minorities like the Ahmadis, for example, are othered by many Pakistani clerics, who denounce them as not being "real Muslims." Likewise, the Balochs are a politically and economically marginalized minority ethnic group in the region of Balochistan, a province that has made separatist claims since the country's foundation. Typically labeled separatist troublemakers by the state, the Balochs are positioned as a threat to the integrity of the nation. In choosing Baloch as her stage surname, Qandeel affiliated herself with a suspect minority, as she simultaneously positioned herself as a Pakistani patriot whose love of country should not be questioned.

Such patriotism is compelling, as celebrity status itself is no guarantee against marginalization in Pakistan. Indeed, many internationally renowned celebrities have

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had their *Pakistani* status revoked for conduct deemed incompatible with national mores. Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousufzai, for instance, is informally called a "BBC agent" by many in Pakistan, in part because people think she left her country for British wealth (Shams 2017). Similarly, the recently deceased and internationally renowned human rights lawyer Asma Jahangir, was labeled an "Indian (and thereby enemy) agent," in part because of the way she publicly maligned Pakistan by highlighting the state's human rights abuses (Hanif and Zaidi 2018; Mohsin 2018). Avoiding such a fate, in taking pride in her Pakistani nationality, Qandeel used her celebrity to "defend" the nation.

As her regional fame grew, Qandeel was invited to participate on the Indian reality show *Big Boss* (modeled on *Big Brother.)* Rather than seize the invitation immediately, Qandeel announced that she had "certain terms and conditions" that would have to be met first. Although these stipulations were never made public, Qandeel's statement patriotically implied that she would not run across the border just for fame (Haq 2016). In another nationalist move, Qandeel posted a video in February 2016 at a moment of increasing tensions between India and Pakistan that was highly critical of India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Qandeel criticized Modi's inhumane anti-Muslim abuses, mocked his working-class background by calling him a *chaiwalla* (tea vendor), and lectured him about the loving character and benign nature of the Pakistani people (India News 24X7 2016). By assuming the air of a mainstream upper-middle class celebrity, Qandeel mocked the entitled demeanor of those who routinely patronize and diminish people of working-class origin. Her jab at Modi's class background, then, was multipronged—simultaneously distancing herself from her own working-class roots, promoting herself as a representative of the Pakistani elite, and mocking the arrogance of those who possess power and influence.

In another move to assert her fervent devotion to Pakistani nationality, Qandeel identified as a cricket fan, tapping into a regional obsession. Cricket is the most popular sport in South Asia and support for the national team has been an emblem of patriotism since independence (Shahid 2018). In competition against teams from other nations, the Pakistani cricket team represents the power and glory of the state and the talents of the people. Rivalries between India and Pakistan lend those matches particular political salience. A 2015 match between India and Pakistan, for example, had over a billion viewers (Bynon 2015). In March 2016, Qandeel posted a selfie-video on Facebook professing her ardor for the national team and promising a special reward if the Pakistani team won the ICC World T20 cricket championship against India (Hindustan Times 2016). The reward promised—a striptease—dedicated to popular cricket player Shahid Afridi, captures Qandeel's unique ability to affirm and subvert national values simultaneously. With the promise of this sexual reward, she demonstrated the intensity of her passion for this national pastime and the lengths to which she might go to support national heroes. Her willingness to sacrifice her modesty, however, deviated completely from accredited norms of femininity, while also unmasking double standards embedded in the embodied indulgences of celebrity men.

When Pakistan's team lost the championship, Qandeel posted another video. Wearing a jersey designed to mimic a cricket-uniform emblazoned with the Pakistani flag, she stood in for the nation, reproaching her team for losing (figure 2). Declaring how greatly the loss hurt national pride, Qandeel proclaimed in Urdu that Pakistanis would not forgive the team this loss. A claim so totally at odds with the behavior of sports fans underscores the satirical element in this post, which mocks the national passion for a game that coexists with indifference toward pressing social issues.

Qandeel's striptease offer defied conservative social norms. Posted in a medium that has global reach, Qandeel performed a provocative version of a *Pakistani woman*, who refused to know her place and claimed the right to speak of and for the nation. In response to this multifaceted provocation, the Pakistani government blocked her Facebook page. Despite government censorship, Qandeel continued to communicate though other platforms, such as Twitter. Her flamboyant behavior kept her "a hot topic" on TV programs, including national news channels (Samaa Digital 2016). Merely gesturing toward nakedness while performing Pakistani nationality increased her fame and her notoriety, even as it raised questions about the boundaries between public and private passions, the possibilities of social media for political speech given the ease of public censorship, and the persistent gendering of public and private spheres in Pakistan.

Act II: Expanding the Scope of Justice

The boundaries of national belonging are constituted through demarcations of "us and them." In postcolonial contexts, newly independent nations often contrast their virtue with the decadence of "the West" and presumptions about women's purity, chastity, and modesty frequently constitute critical points of that demarcation. In February 2016, Qandeel posted a selfie-video that upended these gendered constructions. Wearing a low-cut red dress, she called conservative politician Mamnoon Hussain "cheap" and an "idiot" in response to his proposal to ban observance of Valentine's Day as a celebration of aberrant Western norms (Monzani et al. 2017). Qandeel's critique had a larger target than Mamnoon Hussain as she challenged entrenched notions about appropriate expressions of women's sexuality, romantic relations between men and women, and marriage practices. Her critique surfaced in a variety of unexpected places, including her

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Figure 2
Qandeel is exasperated at Pakistan's cricket loss

Source: Baloch 2016b.

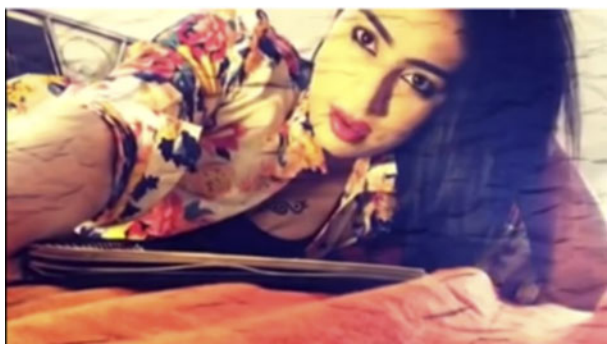
dalliance with the PTI, a party promising justice and change.

Campaigning against state corruption and anti-state violence, notably in the form of drone strikes, the PTI had growing success in mobilizing large numbers of middle-class voters, especially previously apathetic youth, beginning in 2012 (Khan 2016; BBC News 2018). Qandeel began signaling her support for PTI in November 2015. Her endorsements of the political party took novel forms. In early May 2016, for example, she posted a video chanting "Go Nawaz Go," the mantra used by many anti-establishment protestors who wanted to rid the country of corrupt Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (Akbar 2016). Wedding an outsider protest chant to the electoral project of the PTI, Qandeel signaled her support for Imran Khan's fight against corruption. But it was not just conventional notions of political corruption that she sought to challenge: she politicized corrupt modes of male privilege that condemn women to passivity, particularly with respect to love and marriage.

In November of 2015, and on multiple occasions thereafter, Qandeel posted selfie-videos proposing to Imran Khan (figure 3). Usurping the male prerogative to take the initiative in matters of courtship, she attempted to meet him numerous times at his residence. Her initial proposals to Khan were situated in the privacy of her home, depicting her casually resting on her bed (figure 3), staging another rejection of feminine modesty. In another video from November 2015 set in intimate quarters, Qandeel sang a romantic song in Urdu to Khan before asking him to marry her. But in the summer 2016, Qandeel moved from private to public, staging her devotion to Khan in the public sphere. In a highly publicized interview posted on May 1, reporters from the TV channel *Dunya News* interviewed her getting ready to attend a political rally that Khan was scheduled to attend (figure 4). When asked about her plans to meet Imran Khan, Qandeel said in Urdu that she would sit in front of him, holding the ring she bought for him, and publicly ask him to marry her (Dunya News 2016a). Despite the publicity of the unconventional marriage proposals, Qandeel did not meet her hero at the rally as she lacked the pass required to gain direct access to the party leader. In an interview with Pakistani TV channel *Neo News,* Qandeel expressed her disappointment at this failed attempt (Neo TV Network 2016).

Rather than treating Qandeel's pursuit of Khan as either the sincere efforts of a lovelorn young woman or as the crazed behavior of an ardent fan, it is worth probing the political agenda underlying the role reversals in this putative courtship. In another interview about her views of PTI, Qandeel noted that Khan's party "had brought a lot of change already" and that the nation needed to believe that more change would come (Neo TV Network 2016).

Figure 3
Photographic still from one of Qandeel's marriage proposals to Imran Khan



Source: Baloch 2016c.

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Qandeel's social media antics in this instance could be read as her effort to press a political party campaigning on a pro-justice agenda to expand its conception of the political changes needed in Pakistan. By moving marriage proposals from the private to the public sphere and asserting a woman's right to pursue a marriage partner, Qandeel's do-it-yourself activism broached long-established gender and class hierarchies. Qandeel's emotional displays, her broken English, and non-elite Urdu often made her appear a comical figure, who was not to be taken seriously; yet in closed societies subject to government repression, comedy can open a space in which taboo topics can be aired—naming a problem even through satire can contribute to agenda setting, a critical first step toward social change.

Act III: Exposing a Cleric's Hypocrisy

Pakistani religious leaders serve as trusted judges of morality and hold positions of great authority in the social hierarchy. Although Pakistan is home to people of multiple faiths, a religious institution called the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) issues Islamic rulings on various Pakistani laws, specifically those deemed to violate religious commandments. Similarly, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) considers regulating freedom of expression an important obligation, specifying that "freedoms that harm state institutions and its functionaries" are not permitted (The Express Tribune 2012). Struggles are rife in Pakistan between liberal proponents of secularism and religious authorities who insist that demands for a more secular state are neocolonial impositions from the West. Indeed, Islamic clerics claim that adherence to strict religious teachings constitute freedom from Western imperialism.

In a series of exchanges with a powerful Muslim cleric, Qandeel used her do-it-yourself activism to challenge entrenched religious authorities. Her first rendezvous with Mufti Abdul Qavi, an Islamic cleric affiliated with the PTI, began with a discussion of her own violation of conservative norms of decency. In April 2016, Qandeel was asked to appear on a talk show to participate in a debate with Mufti Qavi, over the "morality" of her striptease promise (Boone 2017). The show, which brought Qandeel onto the national stage, ended with Qavi inviting Qandeel to visit him in the city of his residence, Karachi. At the time, most viewers assumed the invitation was made in jest. Yet later that month, Qandeel posted a video-selfie that showed her socializing with Qavi (figures 5–7) in a hotel during the holy month of Ramadan, manifesting a degree of physical closeness that violates religious mandates on gender segregation that clerics like Qavi espouse, as well as cultural norms followed by many South Asians (Dunya News 2016b, 2016c).

Qandeel and Qavi offered markedly different accounts of this encounter, both in terms of who initiated the meeting and what was said during the meeting. Qandeel

Figure 4
News reporter captures Qandeel getting ready to see Khan

Source: *Dunya News* 2016a.

insisted that Qavi had pressed her for "quite some time to meet, adding that the religious scholar had publicly professed his liking of her" (Samaa Digital 2016). Qavi, on the other hand, claimed that Qandeel was "like a daughter to him, and that he was trying to bring her to 'the right path'" (Samaa Digital 2016). In an interview with Pakistani News Channel *Samaa TV*, Qavi also suggested a political reason for their meeting, claiming that Qandeel "asked [him] to arrange a meeting for her with Imran Khan as she want[ed] to discuss the treatment meted out to her by some people during PTI rallies" and as a prominent figure in a PTI religious wing, Qavi agreed to connect her to him (Samaa Digital 2016).

Although Qavi's oral testimony would normally have held more weight, Qandeel had audio-visual evidence to disrupt the "she said/he said" dynamic. Three infamous selfies, (figures 5–7) stills from a video initially posted on her Facebook page, dispute Qavi's account. Each image suggests an intimacy more akin to that of a dating couple rather than of a father-daughter relationship. Figures 5, 6, and 7, are selfies of Qandeel with Qavi in poses even less likely to suggest religious counseling. In figure 5, Qandeel stands, mouth agape, wearing Qavi's hat, while he stands slightly behind her, talking on the phone while maintaining eye contact with the camera. Figure 6 looks like Qavi is posing for the selfie, as sunglasses-wearing Qandeel documents them sitting together. Figure 7 portrays Qavi as slightly more disheveled with vest removed standing in very close proximity to Qandeel, who again sports his hat.

After posting this exposé, Qandeel told an AFP journalist that Qavi "is a blot on the name of Islam" (Boone 2017). Impugning his integrity, she questioned his standing as a representative of the faith. Qandeel's exposé threatened the religio-political entanglements of state institutions in Pakistan. If one politically prominent cleric did not abide by established rules pertaining to gender

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Figure 5
Selfie of Qandeel wearing Qavi's hat, while he stares into the camera next to her

Source: *Dunya News* 2016c.

Figure 6
Selfie of Qandeel and Qavi seated, posing for the camera

Source: *Dunya News* 2016c.

segregation, why should people expect that others do so? If religious practices were flouted by respected clerics, then why should such religious authority ground the state? Thus, Qandeel's use of social media for purposes of whistle-blowing challenged religious, political, and cultural authority in Pakistan. This intervention was deemed so politically damaging that the biopic TV serial made on Qandeel's life omitted the scandal with Qavi altogether.

Political Consequences of Qandeel's DIYA

A few days after her selfie-video with Qavi was posted on June 23, details of Qandeel's identity—her name, information about her divorce and her village—were revealed by mainstream media and circulated widely via social media. Some suggested that in fashioning her online persona, Qandeel had defrauded the public. Five days later, Qandeel held a press conference where she "spoke of worries about her safety and appealed to the interior ministry to provide her with security" (Saeed 2017). No security was provided. Despite increasing numbers of death threats, she continued posting online. On July 7, she fearlessly appeared in a bold music video called "Ban." Wearing a hot pink minidress with a plunging neckline, she provocatively danced with an aspiring pop singer, mocking conservative restrictions placed on public expressions of women's sexuality in Pakistan (Moini 2016). "Ban" went viral, defying those who were attempting to intimidate her into silence and invisibility.

The powerful sexualized graphics of Qandeel's self-fashioning conform to the "scopic regime of late capitalism" that is reorganizing contemporary ways of seeing,

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Figure 7
Selfie of Qandeel and Qavi standing together

Source: *Dunya News* 2016c.

thinking, and believing (Ousmanova 2008, cited in Hawkesworth 2012, 311). However, unlike many political celebrities whose primary concern is advancement within the existing order, Qandeel used the promise of promiscuity as a mode of social protest to challenge religious hypocrisy and repressive cultural and political norms. Through her do-it-yourself activism, Qandeel turned digital media into twenty-first-century weapons of the weak (Scott 1985). Yet she could not shield herself from the backlash she received as a result of her latest provocations.

One week later, on July 15, 2016, Qandeel was found dead in her parent's home. The police quickly confirmed that she had been murdered. Pakistani journalists filmed her brother asserting: "I am proud of what I did. I drugged her first, then I killed her . . . She was bringing dishonor to our family" (Perry and Saifi 2016). Confirming Orientalist tropes that frame domestic violence as "honor-killings," thereby positioning women as victims of "Islamic culture," Qandeel achieved a new kind of celebrity status in the West (Visweswaran 2004).

As the investigation of her murder continued over the following two years, however, it became clear that Qandeel's death involved far more than a domestic matter. Months after her death, Pakistani news reports hinted that Qavi, who had lost his job because of her posts, may have played a more direct role in her death (Zaman 2016; Saeed 2017). Police reported that Qandeel had been murdered in Qavi's friend's home, that Qavi's cousin had driven the murder suspects to the scene, and that Qavi had tried to make a deal with her parents to drop his name from the murder case (Saeed 2017). In public comments about Qandeel's death, Qavi condemned honor killings as "un-Islamic" and claimed that an international conspiracy was framing him for her murder (Qarni 2017). After spending a month in jail, Qavi was released on bail in November 2017. The investigation into Qandeel's death remains unresolved (ARY News 2017).

The political effects of Qandeel's do-it-yourself activism extend beyond the tragedy of her death. Her death has been cited as the catalyst for passage of a law that closed a loophole, which had allowed a victim's family members to forgive the murderer, enabling the perpetrator to evade punishment (Nauman 2016). The October 2016 legislation mandates a minimum life-sentence for murders committed in the name of honor, even if the perpetrator is forgiven. In addition, in December 2016, the woman-led Digital Rights Foundation, which advocates for protections for digital technology users in Pakistan, secured funding for a cybercrime hotline aimed at helping women and minorities (Digital Rights Foundation 2017). Qandeel's celebrity do-it-yourself activism helped forge a sense of national camaraderie and loss that pushed these socio-political changes forward.

Conclusion

Celebrity politics and virtual politics—like the institutional politics of nation-states—remain male dominated and structured by class, ethnic, and geopolitical hierarchies. I extend the study of celebrity politics to the global South and use a working-class woman's experience to do so. In a repressive political regime, where public speech may be condemned as blasphemy and social movement activism can result in imprisonment or exile, Qandeel showed how social media can be used to claim public space both to subvert oppressive class, ethnic, and gender norms and to expand the boundaries of national belonging.

Qandeel's skillful use of social media shifts the site of celebrity politics away from formal institutions and electoral campaigns while raising important questions about the nature of political agency in the virtual realm, the relation of popular culture to political power and

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policy outcomes, and the possibilities for visual culture such as selfies to alter accredited registers of truth.

In constructing herself as an online "spectacle," Qandeel intentionally deployed norm-shattering images to critique established gender, ethnic, and class relations; to expand the social justice agenda to interrogate patriarchal control of women's sexuality; and to challenge the moral authority of conservative clerics. Modeling a form of contentious "politicizing celebrity," she showed how marginalized citizens of limited socioeconomic means can use satire to illuminate cultural, structural, and institutional systems of power sorely in need of transformation. Her visible, visceral, virtual politics created a mechanism for subversive intervention that was perceived as sufficiently threatening by those in power to warrant eradication.

Qandeel's murder demonstrates that contentious celebrity activism comes with serious risks, especially for those without the protections afforded by social and institutional safety nets.

One risk, not yet sufficiently examined, is how her intentional acts of subversion can be depoliticized when recast as frivolous sexual spectacle or as an instance of "death by culture." Both the respectability politics of conservative Islam and the Orientalist tropes of Western observers elide Qandeel's political agency. As digital platforms proliferate, enabling new modes of self-expression and virtual celebrity, more research is needed to investigate how entrenched powers within and beyond borders engage, control, or suppress innovative political protest.

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