The "Good" Dictator: The Semiotics of "Desirable" Authoritarianism

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While authoritarianism is deemed undesirable, whether an autocrat is considered an ally or an adversary impacts how they are seen in Western media. This leads to the question—while it is easy to imagine adversarial autocrat archetypes (e.g., Vladimir Putin)—what comprises the visual archetype of a "good autocrat"? To answer this, this article examines the visual news coverage given by the influential Western publication, *Time*, to two Pakistani autocrats allied with the United States: General Zia-ul-Haq and General Pervez Musharraf. Using semiotic methodology, this article presents a triadic heuristic model outlining the visual archetype of a "good" autocrat: Humanization, Absence, and Hobson's Choice. It demonstrates how visual cues associated with these heuristics serve to construct regimes of truth that present desirable autocrats as "valuable" bodies whose soft power is constructed at the expense of an "other." Finally, it interrogates the significance of these dynamics in analyzing contemporary populist "strongmen."

Keywords: Pakistan, semiotics, authoritarianism, dictatorship, autocrats, photojournalism, Time, soft power

Authoritarianism is deemed highly undesirable, as per Western political norms. However, in practice, Western media depict allied and adversarial autocrats differently. This leads to the question—while it is easy to imagine what an adversarial autocrat looks like (e.g., Vladimir Putin)—what comprises the visual archetype of a "good autocrat"?

This article examines the visual news coverage of two prominent Pakistani dictators ruling between 1981 and 2010: General Zia-ul-Haq, America's ally in the Afghan Jihad, and General Musharraf, America's ally in the War on Terror. The sample comprises images from *Time*, a prestigious American publication and influential intermedia agenda setter since 1923 (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008), making it suitable for a diachronic study. A single source of data is a methodological strength and limitation. While varied sources offer greater depth, a single story told via one outlet over a generational time span allows for documenting consistent historical trends (Popp & Mendelson, 2010).

Using semiotic methodology analyzing three metafunctions: representation, interaction, and composition (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), this article documents the visual grammar of "desirable authoritarianism." It arranges data trends into a triadic heuristic: Humanization (where an autocrat's

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personal appeal is enhanced via varied, accessible representation); Absences (where undesirable aspects of authoritarian rule are minimized/erased); and Hobson's Choice (where the autocrat is contrasted with a worse option). The findings are interrogated using Butler's (1990, 1993) notion of "valuable bodies"; Bhabha's (1991) reflections on absences in narratives; Foucault's (1980) work on "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 1980, p. 133); and Nye's (2008) idea of soft power, examining whether a desirable autocrat's personal soft power extends to his people.

This article first introduces the case studies, outlines a literature review of trends in media coverage of Pakistan and authoritarianism, presents the methodology, and unpacks the analysis. Finally, it discusses the significance of the heuristic model for analyzing contemporary trends.

Strongmen Allies: Zia-ul Haq and Pervez Musharraf

Zia-ul-Haq seized power in a military coup on July 5, 1977 (Hevesi, 1988). He ruled from 1977 until his death in an airplane crash on August 17, 1988 (Talbot, 1998), helming a country that was "authoritarian in political structure" and "aspired to be an ideological state" (Talbot, 1998, p. 245). In 1979, the overthrow of the pro-American Shah of Iran and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan led to Zia becoming America's frontline ally against communism (Talbot, 1998, p. 246). A favored Western ally, he remained a deeply divisive figure domestically. His judicial and educational reforms left a generational impact on Pakistan (see Murtaza, 2011; Rehman, 1988).

Pervez Musharraf seized power in 1999 in a bloodless military coup, ruling from 2001 to 2008 (Percival, 2008). Post 9/11, Musharraf sided with the United States in the War on Terror. Praised as a reformer by Western allies, his critics accused him of favoring the Taliban (Burke, 2007). His divisive legacy includes economic growth, human rights violations, and weakened democracy. In 2019, a Pakistani court found Musharraf guilty of high treason, a verdict later overturned. He died in exile in the United Arab Emirates in 2023 (Ellis Peterson, 2023).

Both Zia and Musharraf relied on a mode of governance known as "managed democracy" (Kulikova & Perlumutter, 2007). Attributed to Indonesia's General Suharno, "managed" democracy is a regime allowing formal democratic institutions, such as elections and a private press, but with limited autonomy. This form of representational "illusion" building (Rehman, 1988) creates credibility for authoritarian regimes.

Pakistan: A Checkered Ally

While Pakistan has aided the United States in two proxy wars—the Afghan Jihad (Talbot, 1998) and the War on Terror (Burke, 2007)—the Western press remains unimpressed. The American government supported Pakistan during the 1971 Indo-Pak War—but the American press did not (Becker, 1977). In press coverage of regional disputes between India and Pakistan, Pakistan's role was evaluated negatively (Mughees, 1995), with economic and military aid deemed problematic (Mughees, 1997). Post 9/11, the country was seen "as the world's largest assembly line of terrorists" (Jalal, 2011, p. 7), with stereotypical press coverage of religious extremism, internal crises, and threats to regional peace (Yousaf, 2015). Pakistani women served as a repository of gendered Orientalist discourses (Walters, 2016), feared as the

"other," mirroring Western apprehensions about Islam (Hameed-ur-Rahman, 2014). This overwhelming negativity has led to the internalization of pessimism among Pakistanis (Yousaf & Li, 2015), with a strong affective impact on how Pakistanis perceive themselves, contributing to their desire to migrate (Yousaf, Tani, & Xiucheng, 2021).

Down With Dictators—Or Not? Media Discourse on Authoritarianism

Media can influence the success—or downfall—of autocrats. "Samizdat" blogs played a critical role in bringing down Kyrgyz President Akayev, a self-styled democrat who ruled for 14 years (Kulikova & Perlmutter, 2007). Therefore, media restrictions are standard under authoritarianism, whether left or right wing (Zweig, 2018). Information sourcing also matters; the dominance of U.S. news sources as intermedia agenda setters sets the tone for how the press in different regions perceives autocratic leaders like Kim Jong-Un (Baek & Jeong, 2020). Media support for a dictator can also depend on the perceived waxing/waning of an autocrat's hold on power (Prendergast, 2017).

A publication's ideological orientation matters greatly. *The Economist's* neoliberal stance led it to downplay human rights violations by Brazilian dictators (Sales & Filho, 2018). Within Brazil, the legacy press's prime commitment to neoliberal ideology manifests itself in more lenient attitudes toward right-wing authoritarian leaders like Bolsanaro (Gagliardi, Tavares, & Alburquerque, 2022). Foreign policy also plays a defining role. Despite being democratically elected, Hugo Chavez was consistently framed in the American press as a dictator (Wilbur & Zhang, 2014). Moradian (2022) critiques the American press's discursive differentiation between the allied royal autocrat, the Shah of Iran, and the antagonistic theocratic regime that succeeded him after the Revolution. Post 9/11, General Musharraf was given softer, more humanized visual news coverage as an ally (Durrani, 2023).

An autocrat's larger-than-life presence can subsume the nation's narrative. Spain's state radio extensively mythologized Francisco Franco to legitimize the regime (Gomez-Garcia et al., 2021). The totalitarian regimes of China and North Korea similarly use propaganda imagery (Hellmann & Oppermann, 2024). This focus can backfire. Saddam Hussein served to justify the Iraq War, but the emotionally charged reporting of his capture failed to reflect the anger of ordinary Iraqis, which later exploded into an uprising (Rodgers, 2011).

The emergence of the digital infosphere has given rise to new dynamics. Illiberal media surveillance and control tactics generally associated with autocracies are being deployed even in democratic nations (Glasius & Michaelsen, 2018a, 2018b). Surveillance, in turn, influences how users share news in cautious, strategic ways in authoritarian regimes like Turkey (Kocer & Bozdag, 2020). In China, terms like networked, consultative, and responsive authoritarianism describe how dissent expressed on social media is managed to support the articulation of preferred conceptions of civic and political culture (Lee, 2018; Li, Lee, & Li, 2016).

This literature review illustrates two gaps. While there is research on Pakistan's image, prior research has not explored the impact of political leadership on its soft power potential (Nye, 2008). Meanwhile, research on authoritarianism primarily uses textual rather than visual data. This article explores

these gaps by offering insights into the semiotics of desirable authoritarianism and its significance in shaping both historical and contemporary political dynamics around authoritarianism.

Methodological Framework

This study employs qualitative content analysis, structured using an inductive reliability technique (Mayring, 2000). The inductive category development process comprised the following steps: determining research questions, formulating category definitions, devising categories systemically, revising categories after coding 10% of the material (at which point formative reliability was checked), and finalizing the coding with a summative reliability check. The data were uploaded into and coded using a Microsoft Access Database, with summative reliability checks performed by two postgraduate coders.

Time, a historic artifact archived in libraries worldwide and known for iconic covers and visual layout, is chosen as a sample for historical visual analysis, following an existing precedent in visual communication (see also Griffin, 2004; Griffin & Lee, 1995; Khan, 2002).

The study uses a purposive sample, "a sample deliberately chosen to be representative of a population" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003, p. 465), a standard practice in visual research (Parry, 2010). Images were sampled from magazine sections using strong visual layouts. These include feature articles (news features, issue-based features, profile features, lifestyle features, and explanatory/supplementary features, defined as small articles added into larger feature articles), photo features, photo essays, interviews, *Time* Person of the Year, and *Time*'s annual selection of the year's most memorable pictures. The unit of analysis for the study was operationalized as the image + caption + article headline + secondary headline. The accompanying text (caption, headline, secondary headline) was used as a verbal context unit (VCU) to anchor the meaning of the image (Economou, 2010).

The quantitative data for content analysis categories rely on two semiotic metafunctions: interaction and composition. Intercoder reliability was calculated using Holsti's formula: interaction analysis, 82.77%; composition analysis, 80.89%.

Interaction refers to a semiotic mode representing a particular social relation between the producer, the viewer, and the object represented (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 43). This taps into the affective dimension of interaction between viewer and subject. It mediates whether we look up or down at someone, whether we can be close to them, and whether we can look them straight in the eye. The category comprises three categories: Gaze/Eye Contact (Direct, Indirect) and Power Relations (Intimate vs. Social Distance). See Table 1.

Table 1. Interaction Analysis—Operational Definitions.

A. Social Distance (Shot Type): This refers to how camera shots emulate the social distance between people (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 124). 1. *Intimate Personal Distance:* The distance at which someone is close enough to touch (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 124). Shot types include extreme close up (ECU), where a specific body part (e.g., lips) fills the frame; close ups (CU), typically of the face; and medium close ups (MCU), depicting the face, head, shoulders, or chest. 2. *Social/Public Distance:* Shots depicting the subject at a further, formal distance (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 124), including midshot (MS; from the waist up), medium-long shot (MLS; shows three-quarters of a person), long shot (LS), showing someone in full length, and extreme long shot (ELS), prioritizing the background/context over the individual.
B. Power Relations and Camera Angle: Power relations as represented by the camera are mediated by camera angles (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). These include low-angle shot (LAS), where the subject is given more power over the reader/viewer; equal angle shot (EAS), where the perspective is that of equality; and high angle shot (HAS), where the reader/viewer has power over the subject.
C. Gaze and Eye Contact: Different meaning potentials are attached to whether the subject looks directly at the camera/viewer, or away from it. To this end, this study provides five categories: direct eye contact, which is direct gaze associated with establishing a pseudosocial bond with the viewer (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 118); indirect eye contact (where the subject looks away from the camera and is presented as an object to be scrutinized); no eye contact (where the subject is blindfolded or has back turned to the camera, implying a sense of disengagement); not applicable (close ups of body parts, photos of corpses); mixed (photos of small groups, where some look at and some look away from the camera); and unclear (image quality does not allow determination of eye contact status).

The way a photographer composes visual information within an image and the choices made by editors/page layout designers with reference to image placement on a page have a significant impact on how readers/viewers process the visual information presented to them (Caple, 2013; Economou, 2010). Composition, the second metafunction, has two aspects. The first is internal cohesion, referring to the way signs cohere within a given image (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), analyzed using the Balance Network (Caple, 2013). The second is contextual cohesion, referring to the way signs cohere externally with the context, analyzed quantitatively using two categories: picture size and picture placement. Table 2 presents an overview of the Balance Network, which measures internal cohesion. Table 3 outlines the categories of external cohesion: picture placement and size.

Table 2. Composition Analysis: Internal Cohesion.

Internal Cohesion: Balance Network	
A. Isolating This refers to when the image singles someone or something out and makes that element the focus of attention (e.g., a portrait of Gandhi). Isolating images focus the viewer's attention on one element in the frame, either singly or dynamically in relation to other elements.	The Isolating configuration has three subtypes: ***Centered-Single*** (a single person in the center of a shot) ***Centered-Triptych*** (three elements, with one in the center as the focal point) ***Axial*** (a dynamic configuration with one element diagonally placed closer to the camera).
B. Iterating This refers to when regular, repeated patterns between several elements occur and are depicted in the image frame in relation to each other (e.g., a group of soldiers saluting). The notion of iterating comes from the repetition or regular/symmetrical patterning of elements within the image frame (e.g., a group of marching soldiers).	The iterating configuration has three subtypes. The iterating configuration is subdivided into two more categories: ***Dividing*** (when there are two elements in the frame) ***Serializing*** (when there are more than two elements in the frame).

Table 3. Composition Analysis: Internal Cohesion.

External Cohesion: Picture Size and Placement

A. Picture Size

Picture size relates to salience, providing a way to measure which themes and actors are given more salience. As exact sizes vary, the sampled photographs are categorized using the following approximate sizes:

- 2 Page (A photograph spread over two pages).
- 1 Page (A photograph spread over one page).
- 1.5 page (Between 1 & 2 pages).
- 2/3 page (Two-thirds of a page).
- 1/2 Page (A photograph spread over half a page).
- Less than half page (A photograph taking up space amounting to less than half a page).

B. Picture Placement

Picture placement relates to the information value of an image (Kress and van Leeuwen, p. 177). It may be interesting to note, for instance, if there are patterns to whether specific recurrent actors receive images placed at the top, center, or bottom of the page. Picture Placement is defined as three dimensions: top, center, and bottom. A centered picture commands more attention; a picture placed at the bottom, less so.

The third semiotic metafunction, representation refers to "the ability of semiotic systems to represent objects and their relations in a world outside the representational system or in the semiotic systems of a culture" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 47). It entails an analysis of the people represented in the photos, their locative circumstances, and depicted activities. This metafunction is analyzed qualitatively, using relevant concepts explained in situ by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), with appropriate historical contextualization. This enables a deeper examination of the semiotic significance of representational choices.

Theoretical Framework

The study integrates the results of semiotic content analysis with concepts from cultural studies, interrogating the intersection of power and representational dynamics. The findings indicate that the visual archetype of a "good" autocrat comprises three heuristic elements: *humanization*, *absence*, and *Hobson's Choice*. The analysis of each is supported by a particular theoretical lens.

For Butler (1993), processes of signification work to make certain bodies more valuable than others. Subjects that are devalued may be seen as "abjected or delegitimated' bodies, which do not qualify as bodies that matter" (Butler, 1993, p. xxiv). It is important, then, to contest and question "what counts as a valued and valuable body in the world" (Butler, 1993, p. xxix). This links with the idea of humanization and dehumanization in narratives, leading to the question: *How does the grammar of visual news narratives render the body of an autocrat valuable via humanization?*

Authoritarianism is often personality driven; the story of an autocrat can overshadow his nation. These absences lead to a "strange forgetting of the history of the nation's past . . . a 'minus in origin'" (Bhabha, 1991, p. 160), where agency is re-designated in historical narratives through representational dynamics. This raises the question: *How is responsibility for authoritarian policies representationally mediated in news narratives? How is this (re)designation of agency used to signify value for the body of an autocrat?*

For Foucault (1980), knowledge links with power: "the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge, and conversely, knowledge constantly induces the effects of power" (p. 52). Discursively, institutionally embedded knowledge will take the form of "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 1980, p. 133) that feed into circuits of power. This leads to the question: *What regimes of truth render autocracy an acceptable form of governance integrated into global circuits of power? What are the long-term consequences of such legitimization for a country?* This question links with the idea of "Hobson's Choice"—as the analysis demonstrates, a "good" autocrat is often justified as a bulwark against worse options.

Finally, this study asks: If the proposed triptych discursively imbues the favored autocrat's image with connotations of soft power—the attraction of an aligned culture, values, and policies (Nye, 2008)—*does an autocrat's soft power also extend to his nation?*

Case Study 1: Zia-ul-Haq

Humanization: The "Reluctant" Ruler

Zia-ul-Haq appears in a total of 22 images. The first was published on March 23, 1981, and the last on December 10, 1990. He receives one cover image. Excepting the cover and one-half-page photo, all other photographs are coded as less than half a page. This may be because the 1980s was a decade when *Time* relied mostly on smaller images.

While Zia's regime disagreed with the Reagan administration over nuclear proliferation, he was still seen as a reliable ally (Hevisi, 1988). His domestic supporters hailed him as a champion of religious reform, and his critics held him responsible for multiple human rights violations (Talbot, 1998). The visual coverage is interesting, therefore, in terms of what aspects of his leadership are emphasized and which are omitted.

Given his allied status, Zia's visual narrative within *Time* is surprisingly circumscribed more within domestic political themes than international ones—political opposition, elections, and changes to government. The two international stories relate to nuclear proliferation. One of these contains visual allusions to the Afghan war (a photo showing an Afghan refugee) and a group of men sorting artillery shells. Interestingly, these are the only two photographs visually pairing Zia with the Afghan Jihad.

In terms of interaction analysis, data trends reveal patterns that facilitate humanization. The data is divided equally across close personal distance (50%) and social public distance (50%), with Zia appearing in both political and familial settings. With reference to power relations, three photographs are coded as low-angle shots—a camera technique that accords power to the subject over the viewer. The low-angle shots are taken at a subtle angle, paired with other visual and verbal cues to facilitate humanization—e.g., a close-up magazine cover photo from March 11, 1985, shows Zia smiling subtly, staring into the distance, with the headline "Moving Towards Democracy?" ("Edging Towards Change," 1985, p. 6). He makes direct eye contact in one image, a small one within a gallery serving as a eulogy.

Patterns of photographic composition support this trend. Most of the images (15, or 68.18%) are coded as Isolating-Single-Centered, highlighting Zia as the sole visual star of the story. Five photographs fall within the Iterating-Dividing format, while two are coded as Iterating-Serializing. These iterative compositional choices allow a representational margin for Zia to be depicted alongside other individuals, chiefly family members and other elite actors. We see Zia with other people in a range of circumstances—compositional choices that serve to bestow value on him (Butler, 1993) and humanize him by showing various aspects of his life.

This representational margin is best exemplified in two cover story articles featuring photo galleries with a soft news/human interest angle. The first cover story looks at Zia in the context of the 1985 elections. The headline reads, "Moving Towards Democracy?" ("Edging Towards Change," 1985). The first page of the news feature juxtaposes an image of Zia in a military uniform against another showing female voters. The headline reads, "Edging Towards Change?" ("Edging Towards Change," 1985). The contrast between two objects with opposing symbolic values—a military uniform and a ballot box—creates a visual allusion to

change, edging, as the text suggests, from military rule toward democratic change, thus evoking the "managed democracy" paradigm (Kulikova & Perlmutter, 2007).

The galleries featuring Zia depict him in a varied set of locative circumstances (i.e., his symbolic positioning) and a wider set of accompanying circumstances (i.e., who is present with him in the photos; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The first gallery shows Zia going about his day—disembarking from a helicopter during a campaign stop while a subordinate salutes, at home with his family, and playing tennis. The opposite page features an unnamed man celebrating after the elections, alongside a photo of Zia's key political rival, Benazir Bhutto. Visually, thus, the reader is encouraged to see him as a humanized leader, not a distant dictator.

Zia's eulogy offers powerful instances of visual humanization, spanning three pages and featuring 10 photographs. For context, another Pakistani leader to have died during the same time period—the first Muslim woman in history to become a Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto—was accorded only five photographs in *Time* for her eulogy. The greater the number of images, the richer the visual storytelling. The photographs depict a varied set of actors—military officers, politicians, and family members. Here, the visual narrative looks at his life, death, and personal and public aspects.

The article headline features two galleries. The headline reads "Vacuum" ("Vacuum," 1988). The first gallery, spread over two pages, deals with his death, showing his funeral with photographs of his coffin, pallbearers, and mourners. A half-page photo shows an honor guard carrying his coffin, while another shows a man praying in the rain, captioned, "Time to mourn: after the tragedy, a man takes off his boots to pray" ("Vacuum," 1988, p.6). Another image shows military personnel "unloading coffins from Bahawalpur," the site of the airplane crash ("Vacuum," 1988, p.7). This is the story of a nation grieving its leader.

The third page of the article shows a close-up of Benazir Bhutto, his potential political successor, at the top of the page. A second gallery, snapshots from Zia's life, takes up the bottom half. The gallery headline reads "Album for a Reticent Ruler" ("Vacuum," 1988, p.8). The caption explains:

> His enemies described Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq as tough, uncompromising, even brutal. But those who got to know the late President privately discovered a devout, often charming man with a strong sense of mission. Here he is, pictured clockwise: at play; with Ronald Reagan; at prayer; with Wife Shafiq; at talks with India's Rajiv Gandhi. "I have been a reluctant ruler," he said recently, "but I am determined to stay here until I solve all of the many problems that continue to face our country." ("Vacuum," 1988, p. 8)

In representational terms, the coverage of Zia's death conveys a clear sense of temporality, fitting for an obituary. The first two pages document a funeral at which he is honored and mourned. The last page shows snapshots of life well-lived—at "play" riding a bike, praying, public moments with world leaders, and private moments with family. In terms of interactive analysis, there are various shots ranging from medium close ups to long shots, direct and indirect eye contact, and wide smiles and somber moments. Multimodal cues are employed to mythologize the autocrat, erasing undesirable attributes (Gomez-Garcia et al., 2021). This links with a broader trend in the Western press to eulogize autocratic allies, such as Singapore's Lee

Kwan Yew and Indonesia's Suharto (Lowenstein, 2015)—the way dictators are revered in their death wholly depends on their usefulness to Western interests and their utility for dominant circuits of power (Foucault, 1980). Furthermore, the eulogies of friendly autocrats are unlikely to acknowledge their repression of internal dissent.

This trend links with the next key element—absences.

Absences: The Erasure of Institutional Reforms

Time presents Zia as a well-meaning man with a purposeful life, which contrasts with views from within Pakistan. Zia's coverage—and coverage of his Pakistan—is notable not just for what is depicted, but also for what is omitted. His rule is critiqued by Pakistani historians and activists for harshly suppressing internal dissent. The minimization of this in *Time* resembles how *The Economist* downplayed human rights violations by the Giesal regime (Sales & Filho, 2018). Niazi (1987) extensively documents Zia's crackdown on the press. Jehangir (2000) provides an in-depth critique of legislative curbs on gender and religious rights. The "reluctant" ruler imprisoned and executed his predecessor, a democratically elected prime minister (Schofield, 1979). His government's policies on the repression of political prisoners included torture and denial of due political process (Amnesty International, 1979). This "minus in origin" (Bhabha, 1991, p.160) minimizing problematic aspects of the regime evokes representational lenience offered to another autocratic Western ally—the Shah of Iran (Moradian, 2022).

 Dissent against Zia does make an appearance in the visual narrative, but in terms of a limited set of actors—people identified generically as protestors or opposition supporters. There are three instances where visual depictions of political dissent are juxtaposed against Zia's photograph. The first shows a law enforcement officer, the second shows a tussle between protestors and law enforcement officials, and the third shows a crowd of protestors. In all cases, dissent is represented using unidentified individuals, with Zia's photograph compositionally placed on the page above their image—a visual reflection, perhaps, of power relations. These three images are typical of visual representations of dissent against Zia—faceless crowds. This trend is partially attributable to the fact that a prominent politician, Benazir Bhutto, led the opposition and, as such, symbolized dissent.

That said—Zia's regime is also criticized by press historians for the constraints it placed on the press, including arrests, public floggings, newspaper closures, and censorship (Niazi, 1986). However, this is absent within the visual narrative of the sample, leading to the question: Are some dissidents more valuable than others? Are dissidents less likely to be named and valued in news narratives if they oppose a leader viewed as a political ally?

Another notable absence relates to the critique of institutional reforms (Durrani, 2018). In the 1980s, a USAID-funded project partnered with the University of Nebraska, Omaha to create and extensively distribute textbooks to school children in Afghanistan and in refugee camps in Pakistan (Haider, 2011; Stephens & Ottaway, 2002). This curriculum, which used images of weapons to teach the alphabet, remained in circulation until the 2000s (El-Edroos, 2011). Pakistan's mainstream education system and curriculum were also revised according to ideological preferences (Hoodbhoy & Nayyar, 1985; Nayyar & Saleem, 2005).

The instrumentality of these reforms in shaping generational mindsets is much debated in Pakistan. Again, this resembles how the problematic policies of the Shah of Iran's regime were minimized, the outcomes of which ultimately led to the Iranian Islamic Revolution (Cottom, 1979).

Burde (2014) notes that these educational reforms are not well known in the West. As they receive no visual coverage within the sample, the agency of Zia's government appears to have been erased. Within *Time* itself, visual references to this phenomenon appear only after 9/11, as part of a discourse that would eventually justify support for another autocrat. An image from September 24, 2001, shows young children bent over desks holding religious text juxtaposed against an image of militants. The caption reads "ABC's: Studying Islam in religious schools, like this one in Pakistan, can be as critical to molding extremists as the training at this Bin Laden camp" ("Sacrificial Warriors," 2001, p.35). This "minus-in-origin" (Bhabha, 1991, p. 160), referencing the cultivation of extremist views within educational materials, is analyzed here to raise the following questions: Are problematic institutional reforms executed by allied autocrats less likely to be scrutinized? What are the long-term consequences of such erasures for global political dynamics—for allies of autocrats with a blind spot to their significance, and for the people of the country carrying the long-term consequences? Who carries the burden of the eventual loss of soft power brought about by institutional erosion—the autocrat or his nation?

Zia's coverage is notable for using galleries as humanizing devices and omitting issues about the repression of dissent and institutional reforms. As an ally in the war against communism, the "Hobson's Choice" dynamics embedded in foreign policy considerations may have mediated these preferences. However, these absent factors eventually contributed to the rise of extremism and the Taliban movement, themes that would eventually dominate *Time*'s post 9/11 coverage of another Pakistani military dictator— General Musharraf.

Case Study 2: Pervez Musharraf

General Pervez Musharraf appeared in 32 pictures over 9 years (1999–2007). The first image appeared on October 25, 1999, and the last on September 24, 2007. His visual coverage is prominently featured in *Time* in various ways. A total of 129 pictures depicting Pakistani nationals appeared during that period. Musharraf's portrayal comprises 24.03% of this coverage. He receives one cover, the image emblazoned with the headline "The World's Toughest Job" ("Dangerous Grounds," 2002). In terms of salience, he receives two double-page spreads, two images covering two-thirds page, and one-half page image. Musharraf is also the only recurrently appearing Pakistani leader during the selected time period to receive two double-page spreads. The rest fall into the less than half-page category, with the majority (19 images) placed either in the top half or center of a page, giving him salience through placement.

Placement is an effective tactic for imbuing an image with salience. Musharraf's coverage displays clear trends in this regard. A total of 10 images (32.25%) are coded as centrally placed (seven in the center of a single page and one each in the center of one and two pages, respectively). Another 10 (32.25%) appear in the upper half of one page (either the left or right side). Only five (16.13%) appear at the bottom half of the page.

About interactive analysis, Musharraf looks at the camera in three photographs. He also receives a fair number of low-angle shots (5 or 16.13%)—the low-angle shots used here are extremely low angles, emphasizing his power as a leader.

Humanization: A Post 9/11 Chrysalis

Multimodal cues, such as sound, are a powerful tool for re-mediating an autocrat's image (Gómez-García, Martín-Quevedo, & Quevedo-Redondo, 2021). The data show similar trends with reference to visuality. The coverage evolves across three key tropes/phases: Musharraf, the military dictator (after the initial takeover in 1999); Musharraf, a bulwark against extremism (following his decision to join the Bush administration in the "war on terror"); and Musharraf, the unreliable ally (documenting his exit from power). In semiotic terms, these narrative trends manifest using several key visual cues.

The first of these strategies concerns how Musharraf functions as a "carrier" of different attributes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The most obvious visual cue in this context is dress. He appears in eight news photographs preceding 9/11; he is depicted in a military uniform in six of these (75%). Post 9/11, there are 22 photos, with 13 depicting him in civilian clothes (59%), mostly immaculate western three-piece suits. The second cue relates to locative circumstances. As with Zia, Musharraf is depicted in a cover story ("Dangerous Grounds," 2002) with linked galleries—a feature story seven pages long, featuring a dozen images (nine of which include him).

The news story begins with a two-page spread. The headline reads "Dangerous Grounds"; the stand-first asks, "Can Pakistan's dictator Pervez Musharraf, a battle-tested soldier, survive the political minefield that lies before him?" ("Dangerous Grounds," 2002). The caption describes "the first couple" in "a quiet moment" ("Dangerous Grounds," 2002, p.16). The photograph shows Musharraf and his smiling wife walking together as she looks toward him. This, as Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) note, is a common semiotic distribution of roles—"the man as the doer, the woman as faithful admirer of his actions" (p. 67). Both wear casual attire and walking shoes, attributes that highlight the informal context—spacious, sunlit, green grounds.

This article also features a gallery arranged loosely along temporal lines. The headline reads "The Road to Busharraf" ("Dangerous Grounds," 2002, p.18). The gallery begins with an image of Musharraf as a young military officer. It moves on to an image of him in military uniform alongside other military men. Next, it features a low-angle cut-out photograph of a garlanded Musharraf in Pakistani clothes, evoking standard attributes of a Pakistani political leader (the caption describes him as being "on the stump" for a referendum criticized for "voting irregularities"; "Dangerous Grounds," 2002, p.18) As with Zia, we see allusions to performative elements of managed democracy. The last image shows him in a formal Western suit with an American flag in the background, an apt symbol, the significance of which is further underscored by the caption, which indicates he is on "a trip to New York," describing how "Musharraf became a key U.S. ally against the Taliban, pitting him against the extremists at home"; "Dangerous Grounds," 2002, p. 18)

The gallery displays a transition in terms of attributes for the same carrier, Musharraf—from military uniform to civilian Pakistani clothes, then to formal suits. The page opposite the gallery shows a larger image

in which he embodies his phase 2 avatar—a strongman ally in a western suit. A midshot shows Musharraf in an immaculate suit, holding his fist up in a triumphant, defiant gesture; the headline reads, "Never Feel Scared"; "Dangerous Grounds," 2002, p.19). The attributes of the carrier—the gesture and his half-smiling, half-defiant expression—reflect the text.

Hobson's Choice—Either Him or "Them"

Approval or disapproval of an autocrat is often framed within specific ideological binaries residing in broader discourses of power (Wilbur & Zhang, 2014). Opponents of a favored autocrat, therefore, may be subjected to "political racialization," as was true of Iranian students in the United States protesting the Shah (Moradian, 2022, p. 713). The autocrat serves as a bulwark against a bigger threat, thus justifying his hold on power. His persona is imbued with soft power, but this does not necessarily extend to the people of his nation. The visual narrative of Zia supporting him as an ally against communism is understated and subtle. For Musharraf, the Hobson choice is made clear using strong semiotic cues.

Before 9/11, in compositional terms, Musharraf's images appear next to those of other Pakistani politicians or political protestors. This changed after October 2001. In the following two years, there is a distinct visual narrative strand that puts Musharraf's images next to those identified as extremists. This phase is marked by the repeated use of contrast as a compositional device, whereby juxtaposed images illustrate an ideological clash between two worlds. Musharraf's image is placed directly opposite individuals identified as hardliners or extremists. The images use differing interactive and representational tools to highlight the contrast; the verbal context unit generally drives it home. The first example appeared on October 22, 2001. The headline, in bold serif font, reads "The World's Toughest Job" (2001). The stand-first adds, "Musharraf risks his life and his country by siding with the West against extremism. Can he survive?" ("The World's Toughest Job," 2001, p. 30). A close-up of the grim-faced General is juxtaposed against a larger photo of "Islamic protestors" who "call for jihad and Death to America" ("The World's Toughest Job," 2001, p. 30).

The images were contrasted using several devices. The first is salience. Musharraf's image is smaller than the image of the protestors, though the closer camera shot places him at a more intimate social distance. The other image is a medium-long shot, which places the protestors, their arms and fists raised, at a social/public distance. While the actual object of their protest is not visually visible, the compositional placement symbolically renders Musharraf the object of the protest. After all, as the stand-first indicates, he has sided with the West. It visually represents the clash hypothesis, functioning as a choice between Musharraf and the extremists, with the viewer implicitly expected to side with one of the two adversaries.

In another example from September 29, 2003, the headline reads, "Is Pakistan friend or foe?" the stand-first adds, "Washington has new doubts about one of its most crucial partners in the War on Terrorism" ("Is Pakistan Friend or Foe?," 2003, p. 20). Musharraf's picture is placed in a centered corner on the left side of the page. It is a small, color photo, a midshot of the General in a Western suit, a look that carries attributes resonant with Western cultural associations. The image on the right shows religious hardliners. The caption reads, "HARD-LINERS: A leader of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, an Islamic bloc, blasts Musharraf at a rally in Peshawer last week" ("Is Pakistan Friend or Foe?," 2003, p. 20). This larger image

dwarfs Musharraf's photograph. It is a Black and White, high angle, point of view shot, in which a speaker looks at a huge crowd. In terms of compositional symbolism, the threat Musharraf faces appears to outsize him. Musharraf's soft power—the values and policies he stands for—are constructed in contrast with the extremist culture and values of some of his people.

Here, with the help of the relevant historical context, we examine a regime of truth related to the indispensability of a friendly autocrat. Truth, from Foucault's (1980) perspective, is a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements. It is "linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces, and which extend it," in effect, a "regime of truth" (Foucault, 1980, p. 133). The regime of truth examined here is crystallized as "Either the Autocrat or the Extremists." The circuit of power it feeds into involves both American and Pakistani foreign policy concerns. The examples above illustrate the concerns of only one end of this circuit—the United States. Using retrospective historical analysis, it is useful to examine the opposing end and the absences in the narrative that serve to justify the regime itself. To this end, the study draws on an alternative, domestic perspective from Pakistan.

Absences: Erased Political Alliances

An example from the data set contrasts an image from a protest by the religious alliance MMA, with a picture of Musharraf. Pakistani analysts have written about how the same coalition, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, came into power via elections allegedly engineered in their favor (Murtaza, 2011). Musharraf's opponents alleged that the alliance essentially served to remind the United States that Musharraf was a bulwark against extremism. At the time of the passage of a Shariah Bill by MMA in 2002, "PPP's Abdul Akbar Khan said the passage of the Shariat Bill and tearing down of signboards were done to create an impression in the United States and Europe that General Musharraf's stay in power was essential to check Talibanization" ("Peshawer: PPP Sees MMA's Nexus With Mushrraf," 2003, para. 2). Moreover, in an interview with the Guardian in 2015, Musharraf himself admitted that his government cultivated the Taliban after 9/11, thus confirming what is "now widely accepted among diplomats and analysts: that the nominal western ally assisted both NATO forces in Afghanistan and the Taliban" (Boone, 2015, para. 6). Here, retrospectively, we see what Rodgers (2011) notes in his analysis of the coverage of Saddam's capture—the compelling story of a powerful autocrat served to erase the nuances of the nation's internal dynamics, leaving the door open to an incomplete picture of what was happening on the ground, with this blind spot creating unanticipated long-term consequences—including the eventual return of the Taliban to power in 2021.

Murtaza (2011) writes that with "the active support of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's MMA government and the benefit of willful neglect by Musharraf, extremists had, in addition to their continuing capacity to indoctrinate people, acquired fearsome capacities by 2007" (para. 5). This year—2007—is the year *Time*'s discourse on Musharraf undergoes its third shift. His image appears in the bottom half of a page for the first time since 2002 in an article titled "Who Lost Pakistan?" The stand-first accuses him of "letting Al-Qaeda get stronger" ("Who Lost Pakistan?," 2007). The next one sees his photograph at the very bottom of the page, below his political rivals Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, whose parties went on to dominate the 2008 election, the outcome of which saw him resign from the presidency in 2008 (September 24, 2007).

Musharraf's profile in *Time* offers an interesting perspective on the evolving visual narrative of an autocrat, whose coverage changes over the years to reflect a representational transformation that followed his utility as an ally.

Conclusion

By analyzing a generational sample of the visual news coverage given to two Pakistani autocrats, the analysis demonstrates that the visual legitimization of authoritarianism draws on three heuristic choices: *absence* (where undesirable aspects of authoritarian rule are either minimized or erased), *humanization* (where the personal appeal of a leader is enhanced by portraying him in varied contexts, particularly personal ones), and *Hobson's Choice* (A choice where there really is only one acceptable option—represented by contrasting the autocrat with a worse option).

To gain in-depth insights into how the visual archetype of a "good" autocrat is constructed and the long-term consequences of this framing on political power dynamics, this article limits itself to one source of data, the genre of photojournalism, and two case studies from one country, and this represents a limitation. Future research may examine how these proposed heuristics apply to the myth of a "good" autocrat constructed across different media and contexts.

This is particularly important, given the rise of populism and the concurrent emergence of "desirable" authoritarian strongmen in countries all over the world. The presence and prevalence of authoritarian forms of governance are no longer an issue confined to the expected traditional bastions of authoritarianism. The appeal of the "strongman" figure has been on the rise across the world in the last five years—be it America's Trump, Brazil's Bolsanaro, or Britain's Boris Johnson. Across Europe, populists—especially those on the ideological right—have been winning larger shares of the vote in recent legislative elections—in Italy, Sweden, Spain, Hungary, and the Netherlands (Silver, 2022). The proposed heuristic may be useful for scholars studying the efficacy of visual messaging in campaigns that catapult avowedly authoritarian leaders into power.

Future scholars may therefore consider the following: *How do these leaders employ multimodal messaging maximizing humanization to leverage better personal branding outcomes in the social media silos they dominate*? What segments of their populations are "othered" and politically racialized to provide positive overtones for this humanization? *What variations of Hobson's Choice are employed to elicit affective judgement?* How are ideologically inflected binary frames employed to construct an autocrat as a defender against "worse" options? *What is the significance of absences characterizing the current narratives of these leaders?* What may be the long-term impact of institutional changes, perhaps occurring under the global media's radar, enacted by these strongmen for the nations they lead, and in generational terms, how will these changes impact perceptions of the nations they lead?

This study aims, therefore, to facilitate analysis of the representational dynamics of desirable authoritarianism, leading to a predictive understanding of consequent historical ramifications for relevant nation-states.

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