**Elections in the age of AI**

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Former prime minister Imran Khan may have been wrong about many things, but his statement that “this is an era of artificial intelligence (AI)” is right on the money.

There’s no denying that this cutting-edge generative AI technology can create parallel and augmented realities or content, which can easily be employed to spin the narrative, especially before and during elections, through social media platforms.

More than half of the world is going to the polls this year including major economies like India, the US, Pakistan and several other Asian and European countries. In this context, a recent World Economic Forum (WEF) report declares AI-powered misinformation as the world’s biggest short-term threat.

“The widespread use of misinformation and disinformation, and tools to disseminate it, may undermine the legitimacy of newly elected governments. Resulting unrest could range from violent protests and hate crimes to civil confrontation and terrorism,” the report warns.

The dangers highlighted by the WEF’s Global Risks Report are based on a survey of nearly 1,500 experts, industry leaders and policymakers. These risks are real as deepfake videos are rife on social media across the globe, and Pakistan is not an exception.

A few weeks ago, short video clips of Indian Premier Narendra Modi singing in regional languages and Indonesian presidential candidates Prabowo Subianto and Anies Baswedan speaking in fluent Arabic went viral on Instagram and TikTok.

Although the use of AI by Pakistan’s political parties is not new in the country, the PTI recently used it to perfection when it cloned its founder’s voice to generate a virtual message for their followers, which was broadcast during an online – or virtual – rally.

Other than the PTI – which has been deprived of its iconic electoral symbol of cricket bat ahead of the February 8 polls – major parties including the PML-N, PPP, MQM-P, and Jamaat-e-Islami seem far behind in the use of high-tech tools as they remain focused on using traditional media to spread their message.

With a staggering 57.1 million young voters aged between 18 and 35 – out of nearly 127 million total voters – the national political landscape is poised for a significant transformation in the upcoming polls. This age group connects itself with technology, spends most of its time on social media platforms, and is massively dependent on it to form its views about political parties and national politics.

In a recent interaction with journalism students at one of Karachi’s leading private universities, I was shocked to learn about the state of media literacy when they shared their knowledge about the sources of information they rely on – which mostly comprises unverified and non-traditional media outlets.

So, those political actors who are proactive and use new tools of information are more likely to sway young voters towards them.

There are risks that generative AI can also emerge as a powerful weapon for spreading mass discord in society. Until recently, producing fake imagery was not that easy. However, technological development and advancement achieved during the past few years made it possible to generate high-quality AI-generated content in real-time.

Although in Pakistan multiple factors influence an election outcome at the local level, an information ecosystem affected by disinformation can create disturbances and disharmony in an already tense environment.

Imagine a scenario where an AI-generated video of Imran Khan is released on Election Day, urging his followers to launch protests or target political rivals – what could happen then? The country lacks the mechanism and tools to counter such a deadly scenario other than just slowing down internet connectivity and blocking apps.

We witnessed what happened on May 9 – which was the outcome of months of narrative building after the PTI’s removal from the government. In a country like Pakistan where fake news and disinformation are prevalent and where no section of society is spared from dangerous social media trends, AI is most likely to change the way elections are contested here.

AI-generated content may boost the existing believability of highly localized misinformation thus denting election credibility and paving the way for a new wave of crises.

In countries like Pakistan, where we have little or no control over information manipulation, social media giants are also responsible for ensuring that the country’s political landscape is safe from any interference.

Content moderation and enforcement of policies in countries like Pakistan are not as efficient as in the US or European nations. Consequently, internet users here are more likely to come across lots of harmful content than other regions.

The Election Commission of Pakistan, Pakistan Telecommunication Authority and other agencies must develop liaisons with social media giants like Meta, Google, X, TikTok, and Microsoft to ensure that the polls are held peacefully without any hindrance created by AI-generated fake content.

Not only this, it is in political parties’ interest to set strict guidelines for their social media cells binding them to a code of conduct. This will help build the nation’s trust in the electoral process, and aid in developing a lasting democracy.

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