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STREET ART AS POLITICAL PROTEST: POST-ELECTION WALL MURALS IN KARACHI (2018–2022)

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ABSTRACT

Street art has always been a form of political speech, typically in places where traditional means of protesting are too constrained. Following the 2018 general elections, wall murals in Pakistan, and Karachi in particular, became a new medium of critique and expression. This article examines the post-election murals between 2018 and 2022 as political resistance, citizen engagement and urban discourse. Through a qualitative case-study, this study draws on fieldwork, photo documentation and semi-structured interviews with artists, activists and residents. For analysis, thematic coding was used to assess the presence of iterated motifs, plotlines and symbolic ploys. The murals countered campaign promises and focused European attention on corruption, inequality and governance while expressing citizens' deepening frustration over political uncertainty. Mural art also reinstated urban public space, turning forgotten walls into arenas for democratic discourse. The study argues that Karachi's Street art challenges hegemonic political narratives and expresses other forms of citizenship and governance. These are productive provocations that have ramifications for larger discussions about art, politics, and urban studies, focusing attention on one way in which visual culture can be wielded as a focus of grassroots political protest.

Keywords: street art, political protest, Karachi, wall murals, elections, resistance, visual culture

INTRODUCTION

In a range of international situations, art and politics collude to turn the urban environment into contested sites for dialogue or dissent. Street art or murals are understood as a visual activism practice, where it can subvert power relations and promote the voices of the marginalized (Iveson, 2010; Young, 2016). Unbounded by the walls of art galleries, murals frequently occur spontaneously in public areas where groups and individuals lacking access to elite cultural and political arenas can add their voice. As such, murals can be more than a visual interruption; they function as some of the most potent forms of social commentary, local protest and civic imagination.

This study was set within the context of post 2018 general elections in Pakistan where political uncertainty and polarization prevailed, particularly in Karachi -the biggest country's most politically intense city. Elections signaled the emergence of the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) as a new powerful political force that replaced old players, like the PPP and MQM in urban areas (Shafqat 2019). But the metamorphosis was anything but seamless. The postelection period was

characterized by charges of rigging, changing political alliances and increasing disenchantment with the government. With the political landscape of the city divided, walls throughout Karachi became a playground for citizens to express themselves and murals sprouted up expressing both dreams for change and disillusion with failed aspirations.

What is important is the demonstration of how popular citizens and artists have historically harnessed visual culture to protest, critique, or challenge prevailing p... Street art in Karachi is not decoration; it is a socio-political text which gestures directly to urban fears about corruption, inequality and exclusion from formal decision-making. This type of visual protest is in line with global currents, Katrinn said. Take, for example, the role that graffiti and murals in Cairo played during the Arab Spring uprisings as instrumental forms of resistance — they were used to record revolutionary desires as they happened (Abaza, 2016). In the United States also, street became memorials and calls for justice with Black Lives Matter murals (Rivers, 2021). These global parallels remind us that street art typically thrives during periods of political change and social upheaval when formal mechanisms fail to address the grievances of the citizenry.

Despite its increasing presence, there has been relatively little scholarly investigation of Pakistan's political street art. Some research has examined the function of graffiti and wall chalking as political messaging tools in urban Pakistan (Ali, 2018), but none has focused on murals as an explicit form of protest politics following the election. Also, when Karachi is acknowledged together with walls for its historically associated urban ethnopolitics, party-based violence and street-level activism (Gayer, 2014), this memory cape of political history in the city has rarely been taken seriously. This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing how murals produced between 2018 and 2022 testify to the changing interplay among art, politics, and citizenship in Karachi.

The research setting is particularly interesting as Karachi epitomizes the promises and pitfalls of democracy in Pakistan. And as the commercial nerve center and largest city, its urban landscape is a battleground for political parties, business tycoons and marginalized people. In such a dense and polarized atmosphere, murals serve not just as expressions of yearning for visibility but also as assertions of the right to space and recognition. By reconceptualizing abandoned or expropriated walls as protest murals, muralists simultaneously question both political power and the commercialization of urban territories (Schacter, 2014).

There is also relevance in the murals' capacity to reshape our ideas about political involvement.

In a context in which voter turnout, institutional trust and citizen engagement continue to deteriorate, visual protest performs an alternative democratic conversation. Murals talk to the public with none of the mediation that filters through television debates, party rallies or digital algorithms. They interact with citizens in their daily contexts — markets, bus stops and residential areas — ensuring that politics is inevitable and participative. Therefore, examination of these murals illuminates how art can enrich democratic engagements that extend beyond the ballot box.

To that end, I discuss post-election murals in Karachi from 2018 until 2022 to highlight their symbolical language, sociopolitical themes and role in urban politics. The paper has three goals: (1) to chronicle the themes and narratives that appear in Karachi's post-election murals; (2) to reflect on how murals are a resource for protesting, and as such, an important mode of resistance; and (3) to place these murals within larger debates around urban democracy and political speech. Grounding local practices in global conversations, the study reveals how Karachi's walls have emerged as crucial sites for contemplating alternate futures and negotiating what democracy means.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Street art has long had associations with political protest, as a visual language through which communities communicate their defiance of authority and creative repurposing of public space. Latin American liberation murals of the 1960s and 1970s to current urban graffiti movements, theorist foreground walls as sites of both power and resistance (Cockcroft & Barnet-Sánchez, 1993). Especially, murals have frequently been associated with movements of liberation and identity-making in a collective sense that serve at once as documentation and mobilization. For example, Chicano murals painted by Californians did more than express migrant identity; they also served as a form of protest against racial inequality, thus showing the two fold nature of street art as both artistic and political (Latorre 2008).

Street art has historically thrived at times of authoritarian rule or where public expression is tightly regulated around the world. As the scholar Aimar Boum wrote in an essay on graffiti in post-Revolutionary Egypt (which Abaza cited), walls became "the archive of the revolution," inscribing popular disgruntlement as well as aspirations for a democratic aftermath. Likewise, Rolston (2012) points to the ways in which murals in Northern Ireland mirrored sectarian rifts whilst at the same time providing alternate media spaces where political ideologies were

challenged and remembered. These cases demonstrate a pattern: when the mainstream media is censored, captured or distrusted, walls become sites for unmediated political expression.

No where have walls been as apparent in politics than in South Asia. Wall chalking and murals have historically been used by political parties as a mode to establish visibility, announce territorial control and reach the urban masses (which is largely low income and may have limited exposure to legal media) (Ali, 2018). This practice was particularly notable in the city of Karachi, where parties like the Muhajar Quami Movement (MQM) have typically turned public walls into partisan billboards and through which both exercised power and silenced rivals (Gayer, 2014). But walls have not solely been the domain of political elites; they are also a space where activists, students, and popular movements have put forward counter-narratives. Under the dictatorship of Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988), coded graffiti and underground wall slogans were effective means of resistance against censorship and authoritarianism (Siddiqui, 2017).

Theoretically, researchers position street art in larger debates about the '"right to the city"' (Lefebvre 1996; Harvey 2012), wherein marginalized populations appropriate urban spaces for democratic modes of engagement. Murals interrupt the control of public space by intrusion of counter-narratives that can bypass political or commercial monopolization (Iveson, 2010). In so doing, protest murals address not simply current political concerns but contest over the governance of urban space more generally. Schacter (2014) terms them "ordinary affects" that structure everyday urbanism, for they supplement desiring and seeking; they are affective and resistant signaling the kind of life (critique) lived in the city.

Methodologically, visual ethnography and semiotic analysis have been employed to decipher protest murals (Latorre 2008; Phillips 2019). Visual ethnography offers a way for researchers to situate murals in the social and cultural practices of particular groups, whereas semiotics can reveal symbolic codes — imagery, colouring and placement, for instance — that present political meaning. These strategies also recall the ex-temperament of murals: how they can flash into existence, spur discussion and debate and then recede, a barely perceptible presence in memory or photographic record. The ephemerality of murals underscores their risky and chilling power to influence politics (Phillips, 2019).

Academics also highlight the dual role of murals as memory and mobilization. They retain memories of moments and movements—revolution nary graffiti on Tahrir Square (Abaza, 2016) or the murals created as a result of the BLM protests in American cities (Rivers, 2021)—while

also orchestrating citizens to act. For those the technology does reach, it means that even if they are left out of digital activism or formal debate, political messages come to them in their daily surroundings.

Within this broad regional and global context, there is little scholarly examination of Pakistani mural practices. A rare detailed study of political graffiti in Karachi is given by Ali (2018), which demonstrates how walls are sites both of propaganda and resistance. But as vital as Ali's work is, it centers more on graffiti and slogans than murals as visual protest. By the same token, investigations into Karachi's city politics (Gayer, 2014), recognize the symbolic purchasing of what walls entail as they are seldom attentive to such aesthetic or activist qualities in mural practices. This leaves a major void in any understanding of how murals – different from graffiti or chalking – are being used purposefully as acts of resistance by communities in Pakistan today.

The time after the 2018 elections is especially under-studied. If this is true, then why have Pakistani-psephologists remained so quiet on the role of urban terrains as a central site for visually contesting different dynamics during election process? 7 The issue here is not about whether Pakistanis were rebelling against the establishment or not after 2018, etc. There are platoons of writings and discussions that have revolved around these questions in relation to PTI-a prevailing government now. What binds them however is ignoring how people across cities response to some shifts in governance, populist rhetoric and a new leader even before we entered this second decade particularly the youth minds who want freedom from bad traditions of politicsn (Ahmed & Petkartik Mishram, 2019). The emergence of murals from 2018 to 2022 is the reflection of a new tendency: that artists and activists have begun to use public walls not only for slogans, but for more complex visual narratives (including satire, symbolism and social critique). Making sense of this phenomenon involves linking global counter art knowledge to the specific urban and political landscapes of Pakistan.

Research Objectives

To dissect the visual content and theme of political murals and graffiti in Karachi (2018-2022).

To explore how murals serve as instruments of protest and political defiance.

To try to understand the impact street art has in urban politics and democratic discourse -in Pakistan this time.

Research Questions

What do the post-election murals in Karachi depict?

In what way do these paintings constitute counter-narratives to official political speech?

How do murals function to take reclaim spaces for democratic expression?

Significance

By considering these questions, this research both adds to visual culture studies, but also studies of political protest and urban studies. It contextualizes Karachi into global discussions on protest art while also addressing a significant gap in Pakistan-related scholarship. Yet in prioritizing this exchange, the book tacitly registers street art's critical meaning not just as a cultural practice but as political intervention—one that reconceives the modes of democratic participation available under conditions of uncertainty, disillusionment, and constrained freedoms.

METHODOLOGY

This research was based on a qualitative, interpretive case study design on the one hand and Karachi as a single point of focus for research and microcosm for urban political contest in Pakistan on the other. The interpretive method allowed a deep investigation into street art as meaningful imagery and how artists and residents produce political realities in visual-spatial practices. Artworks of this kind find widespread output in protest art scholarship because they prioritise context, voice and symbolism above numerical generalisations (Phillips 2019; Rivers 2021). Karachi was chosen not only because it is Pakistan's largest city but also for its politically layered history, in which ethnic diversity, party politics and grass-roots activism have all "come together on the walls" of the city.

Data gathering took place during three years (2019-2022) and employed multiple methods to develop triangulation of the voices, and strengthen the validity of the findings. The first approach was comprehensive field observation and photographical documentation. Over fifty murals were photographed systematically through five different neighborhoods – Lyari, Saddar, Gulshan, Korangi and Clifton. They focused on sites deliberately selected to represent a range of socio-political settings, from working-class neighborhoods with strong local histories of grassroots activism to wealthy communities where murals often hold different symbolic connotations. Field observation meant more than noting the appearance of murals; it involved taking in spatial processes: who interacted with the murals, how long they'd last before being painted over, and how they meshed with surrounding political posters, advertisements, and graffiti.

In addition to document review, the use of semi-structured interview was vital for qualitative depth. We did twenty interviews with artists, activists and locals. These discussions were

intended to provoke ideas around the political weight of murals, prompting people to consider issues around authorship, symbolism, audiences and impact. By involving residents — in addition to artists — the research documented both what the murals were meant to communicate, and how people living with them understood their message. This multi-voiced approach also ensured that the analysis was not contained within a straitjacket of elite or artistic discourse but rather mirrored a more down-to-earth conception of urban political communication.

The collected data was analysed with theme coding guided by grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Open-ended questions in the transcribed interviews and mural images were iteratively coded until emergence with categories developed from a ground-up process. Common themes were corruption, governance crisis, inequality, party politics, populism and citizen action. The visual content was analyzed using semiotics looking at symbols, colors and spatial relations to unravel the embedded political meanings. Such representations as broken chains, flesh-white fists or political caricature were analyzed in light of the wider discourses on resistance, disenchantment and disillusion. Thematic and semiotic analysis in mutual combination enabled the analysis of texts, images, and context.

Ethical principles were followed during the research. Interview participants were given a full understanding of the purpose of the study and consent was acquired prior to recording or transcription. Due to the politically sensitive environment of this study, specific identifying details were concealed in order to minimize the likelihood that participants would experience backlash. The photographic record of murals respected the sensibilities of communities—murals are part of the public realm, but people were not recorded without their consent and distortions of neighborhood conflicts were avoided. And the research accepted street art's impermanence—murals would frequently vanish through weather, state removal or repainting—not seeing their transitory nature as a handicap but as part of the political narrative.

In this multi-method approach, the study managed to catch hold of murals' contested and dynamic function in Karachi's post-election panorama. Bringing together fieldwork, interviews and systematic coding, it shed light on how ordinary walls served as canvases of dissent to span the distance between artistic expression and urban politics.

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

Thus, the analysis points out that three dominant themes repeatedly appeared throughout Karachi's post-election murals during the period from 2018 to 2022: corruption and

disillusionment, resistance and hope, and the reclaiming of urban space. All three themes established themselves through both the imagery and textual slogans that simultaneously appeared spray-painted across the murals, functioning as a form of collective narrative that expressed the core of the public mood in the ever-changing political atmosphere. Corruption and disillusionment have been among the most pronounced themes, especially in central points like Saddar where crowds of pedestrians offered murals more visibility. A key mural that was voice-recorded in late 2019 was that of a bloated politician with a way-too-swollen belly full of currency notes, whereas ordinary men and women stood outside utility stores with empty bags, all with paint-strokes of intense pain. This bloated scene of excess situates the humor around inflation, money-printing, mismanagement, and unmet campaign promises. The mural was drawn in a caricature style similar to editorial cartoons, which is an intensificstion of satire to critique, transforming humor into some funny-looking dark truth of political life. Other murals boasted similar elements: in Gulshan, ballot boxes were smashed vessels that leaked into a polluted gutter, revealing how voting served little purpose when citizens saw the state as severely corrupt. It reiterated the complaint of gulshan residents regarding rising prices of electricity, shortages of petrol, and allegations of rigging votes. Their disgusted tones additionally demonstrated their own disgust with the state of affairs and were thus very healthy forms of catharsis where citizens could look around town and see their very own anger replicated.

Together with disillusionment, many murals depicted the narrative of resistance and hope that was a counterpoint, highlighting collective power. Lyari, rich in a history of grassroots mobilization, proved itself especially fertile ground. Painted on a wall near Lea Market, there was a huge mural of a clenched fist breaking chains, along with the slogan Awam ki hukumat, nafrat ki siyasat nahin" ("Government of the people, not politics of hate"). This image was not just drawing from the global vocabulary of protest imagery, but situating the protests within Karachi's fraught realities, positioning resistance as a rejection of sectarianism and divisive populist politics. In the same way, in Korangi, a wall mural painted during the COVID-19 pandemic showed healthcare workers masked against barbed wire — a sign of their own shielding of society and failure by the state to protect its frontline staff. The mural connected electoral accountability to wider struggles for social justice, showing how walls had become sites of expressing grievances that exceeded party politics. For many who saw them, these works became symbols of hope, turning walls from barriers to be protected or attacked into places of

solidarity that drew a demand for collective regeneration out of the midst of the unknown.

Equally important was the issue of re-appropriating urban space. In areas such as Clifton and Gulshan, where billboards and party graffiti tended to cover available surface space, artists deliberately targeted forgotten alleys, derelict walls and neglected boundary markers. One 2021 mural, like others painted over slogans of politicians and political parties, pictured the wall as a river of ballot papers leading to open sewers — holding out the promise of democracy alongside civic decay. Interviewed in the area, residents described it as "louder than TV debates" and said its location meant that commuters going to work every day had to face the ultimate failures of governance in spaces they inhabited. By turning blank lots into stages for political speech, these murals took the wind out of the sails of commercial and partisan messages, using these spaces to assert the ordinary resident's right to create symbols that mattered in the city.

Community perceptions of the murals exposed varying levels of interaction. Many residents said in interviews that they saw them not only as works of art but as brave political statements. Some went so far as to laud their bravery, saying on Instagram that the artists were "saying what many are afraid to say," but others feared there could be retribution. Generational splits told an especially revealing story when it came to the murals: younger respondents, and those younger than 30 in particular, were far more likely to see painting as a democratic act that mattered; and often framed public art as "our way of voting after the vote." Older respondents, however, were often dismissive of the artworks as ephemeral gestures since while they could command attention, they weren't permanent enough to effect systemic change. This rift speaks to the relationship of visual culture and political participation. How interventions are perceived in importance varies along generational lines with a new generation understanding their weight less than an older one does (if at all).

Above and beyond personal interpretation, the murals provoked public discussion. During fieldwork, I noted that for many murals, they became conversational hubs in public areas such as tea stands, bus stops and local markets. Since then, passersby have stopped to comment, argue or take photos of the work often in relation to present political events. Murals sometimes became a focus of controversy, as opponents tried to paint over them or replace them with party slogans, transforming walls into contested terrain for political legitimacy. In the ceaseless process of mark-making and erasure, these acts of piety added to the meaning of urban space…they are dynamic surfaces, signaling successful acts of contrition performed; guilt erased and so on."

constant drive for creation/erasure/renewal this served to emphasise The dynamism in Karachi's built-form; its walls are never static but always subject to negotiation between authority (government/planners) and dissent.

DISCUSSION

These findings are also in accordance with the international literature that conceptualize street art as a political counter-narrative, and a type of visual activism, which has potential to relate frictionally to dominant ideology (Iveson, 2010; Schacter, 2014). Through examining post-election murals in Karachi, it highlights how urban walls became sites of symbolic contestation where dissenting narratives were expressed. Unlike party propaganda that frequently deploys walls as instruments of visibility and branding, the murals I observed were citizen-led. Their ground-up nature placed them within a continuity of global traditions of protest art that also included, for example, Mexico's liberation murals epitomizing collective resistance to colonial and capitalist exploitation (Cockcroft & Barnet-Sánchez, 1993) and Cairo's revolutionary graffiti chronicling defiance during the Arab Spring (Abaza, 2016). Murals in Karachi also serve as examples of visual practice that transgresses local politics to invoke global repertoires of protest and solidarity.

The murals also reflect the double-edged relationship between art and democracy in situations where "ordinary" political participation is considered tainted. They gave people an inexpensive, accessible way to express disillusionment and opposition that could not be easily filtered through more mainstream media or formal politics. This democratization of expression fortifies previous findings in various contexts that street art has acted as "the voice of the unheard" (Rolston, 2012). In Karachi, murals amplified complaints about corruption, inequality and state neglect in ways that were visible to a larger swath of the population, including people on the streets who may not otherwise participate in formal protests. But for urban planners, cultural policymakers, and local government the practices mentioned above show how inclusive public spaces that encourage expression and conversation instead of stifling it are important. The attempt to criminalize or efface political murals risks eroding democratic culture; policies that acknowledge their symbolic value may enrich urban citizenship.

The study also serves as a reminder of fickle public opinion. In interviews I found that there were generational distinct, where youth were more likely to see murals as legitimate forms of democratic participation while older people saw them as fleeting and ineffective. This

generational rift echoes a broader literature that indicates younger cohorts are more apt to try out informal or non-institutionalized forms of political activity (Rivers, 2021). The results therefore inform discussions over how art of protest mirrors and creates political subjectivities, in particular among youth detached from traditional party forms.

However, there are some limitations of the study which is also acknowledged by the authors. Its reach was limited to certain areas in Karachi that, though diverse, are not indicative of the entire spectrum of urban political art practices in Pakistan. It's possible that theater in other cities – like Lahore, Peshawar and Quetta – will emerge with different dynamics due to their own cultural-political situation. Other factors such as time limited our researchn because murals are naturally only ephemeral and often painted over or simply affected by the weather.%; Fernei sono stati i vincoli temporali: i muralI sono naturalmente effimerI vengonodipinti sopra,l%@",eropovuti subire I'agotlte del tempo che ci impediscono un% estimazione logitudinale dei loro significati nel tempo. Furthermore, even if the interviews did reflect local opinion, reticence about political correctness might have caused some participants to self-censor, thereby tempering the radical readings of certain murals.

The generalizing insights could be further extended in future research by framings them within comparative paradigms. Cross-city studies within South Asia could show how protest art in one context takes up common experiences of democratic backsliding, populist politics or state censorship. A comparison with cities such as Dhaka or Kathmandu might reveal regional continuities and differences in visual resistance traditions. Further, digital media techniques like online archiving and geotagged databases may serve to save impermanent murals and provide researchers, artists, and activists with accessible archives (Phillips, 2019). Not only would such projects offer protection to indispensable visual histories from extinction, but they would also open the door to other related transnational movements of protest art.

Apart from academic research, policy and practice implications have important practical values of the results. Acknowledging street art to be a form of civic expression could incite urban planning practices that reserve space for creative dissent, such as community mural projects or artist residencies centered around civic action. In an age when digital misinformation and polarized media frequently splinter public discourse, street murals are a physical, shared locus of encounter where diverse publics can come together to talk. Their visibility and lack of distance serves as a reminder that democracy is not just an affair between parliaments or courthouses, but

something performed in daily public spaces.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals that the murals of post-election Karachi (2018-2022) were not simple cloths bearing designs but powerful acts of political contestations and democratic communication. It came in the wake of disputed elections and during escalating social and economic tensions, with these murals presenting a visual rebuttal to official narratives. They pointed to corruption and inequality, shortcomings in governance — even as they reappropriated the urban walls used for decades as sites of civic participation. As embodiments of anger and hope, they were mirrors of public mood and stimulants of discourse that reminded us that politics is not only to be found in parliaments or ballot boxes but in the spaces of everyday life and the imagination.

The findings speak to broader international research on protest art by placing Karachi within a genealogy of cities where walls have double-majored as stages (from the streets of Latin America and now up throughout the Middle East) into resistance. But the study also offers new insights by dealing with distinctive urban and political conditions in Pakistan that have received limited attention in scholarly research. In the process, it demonstrates how localized modes and practices of mural making intersect with transnational forms of visual activism in ways that complicate theoretical debates about art's relationship to democratic engagement. The research emphasizes that murals are not static works of art, but living interventions, prone to cycles of creation, erasure and retranslation.

By investigating themes of corruption, resistance, and spatial reclamation, the research delves into what it means for visual culture to provide a voice for disenfranchised citizens that are either excluded from mainstream media or institutionalized political inclusion. For policy makers and urban planners, the results highlight the potential for acknowledging symbolic and participatory dimensions of street art to enhance democratic culture and more inclusive public spaces. For researchers it opens up paths for comparative work—across South Asian cities where political murals continue to thrive, despite a dearth of serious scholarship.

At the same time, the "disposable" nature of murals creates a challenge — and an opening. And they are, like so many of the objects in this list, fragile, which is partly why they resound so forcefully politically but part of what risks their future being to vanish entirely from the historical record. worthy of more systematic documentation and digital archiving, to ensure that

such evanescent but electrifying performances are retained for analysis and recollection. Geographically widening the focus to other cities in Pakistan, or embracing comparative regional frames, would provide additional nuance in how protest art circulates within specific cultural and political milieu.

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