



Quantifying Democracy: An Exploration of how Numbers undermine Democracy in Pakistan.

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Abstract:

The global drive towards datafication of knowledge and decision-making is not simply an outcome of advancement in measurement techniques and new technology. It is rather embedded in new forms of global governance, which emphasizes the regimes of accountability, and evidence based policy. In this new mode of governance, information plays a key role. But not all forms of information are useful. It is only the information contained in a numerical form, presented in a simple and accessible format, collected through scientific indicators, which is acceptable. It is this form of data, which can claim to be objective, free from political bias and untainted by political opinion. However, behind these claims of scientific objectivity lie complex social processes and political power involved, and is very much susceptible to human fallibility and error. The paper will explore the ways in which the process of democracy is being defined and understood in Pakistan through quantitative approaches and will highlight how it undermines the genuine democratic process in the country.

Keywords: Democracy, Exploration, Pakistan, scientific, political opinion

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Introduction:

Datafication of social sciences has attracted many critical voices. The effort to understand the social world by reducing it into quantifiable numbers has created numerous ethical and social problems, and has given rise to a new form of technical knowledge, which often claims to capture the true picture of reality. Datafication in social science implies the translation of a social phenomenon into a quantitative format. This form of presenting a social phenomenon enables to enter and re-enter the data into different numerical formats and give rise to a particular translation of the phenomenon being studied. It also directs our attention to the things, which are more easily quantifiable and ignore other important things, which are difficult to reduce to numerical forms (Merry 2016). Data has also gained a value of its own. It is considered a “new oil” to be extracted for knowledge creation (Couldry and Ulises 2019). Data particularly in a digital form is a huge resource and is used by technical expert to create knowledge, which is said to be free of subjectivity and political bias. However, it also gives rise to not only a new form of technical knowledge which decontextualizes and homogenizes the social phenomenon being studied, but also creates a great variety of ethical issues of privacy and surveillance (Sobe 2018).

Data is also associated with a new form of governmentality and exercise of power which emphasizes accountability and evidence based policies (Deleuze, 1992; Merry, 2016; Piattoeva, 2015). This new form of data governance has shifted focus from the processes and the means to the outcome based accountability. The data based governance and its associated mechanisms of predictability through algorithms have created many forms of issues of social justice and inequalities. The new algorithmic governance not only contributes to perpetuate the existing social inequalities on grounds race/ethnicity, class and gender but also works to increase them (O'Neil 2016). Algorithms that feeds on the so-called object data often becomes a “weapon of Math destruction” (O'Neil 2016) and “black boxes” (Latour and Woolgar 1986). The mysterious processes happening inside the “black boxes” often creates new realities. It is argued that these datafication approaches to knowledge in effort to understand reality, creates realities of its own. Datafication “is not only a tool of analysis, but also highly performative, as they are framing our thoughts and conceptions of things.” (Popkewitz, Pettersson and Lindblad 2018, 1)

Given the problems associated with the method of quantifying and reducing the social phenomena to numbers in order to render it “understandable” and “calculable”, it is interesting to raise question regarding democracy and its relationship with quantitative methods of conceptualization, definition and

measurement. As has already been mentioned, numbers are performative (Popkewitz, Pettersson and Lindblad 2018, Davis, Kingsbury and Merry 2012), this paper attempts to look into the various processes involved in framing and measuring the concept of democracy in Pakistan. The paper contends that the process of defining the quantitative indicators to measure the concept of democracy in Pakistan is far from being objective but deeply mired in the politics of domination and control. The complex social process of participatory democracy is conceptualized in a highly technical way and reduced to practices like voting and presence of multiparty system. Defining of the indicators for the measurement of democracy is also far from being objective scholarly act. Certain indicators are privileged over others, while some are completely ignored. These measurements are picked-up by various forms of electronic media and its circulation gives rise to a new form of social reality which is completely different from the original phenomenon supposed to be measured.

Theoretical Framework

The research carried in this paper is inspired by the work of Sally E. Merry (2016; 2012; 2011). She argues that the use of indicators as a mode of gaining knowledge is not a new phenomenon but goes back to the rise of the imagined communities (Anderson 2006) of the nation state. However, the present use of indicators as a methodology of gaining “objective” knowledge and as a method of governance stems largely from the current economics structures and business techniques (Merry 2011). The big global institutions like World Bank, USESCO or OECD produce huge quantities of indicators to measure various social phenomena ranging from poverty, illiteracy, disease to Human Development Index (HDI), global governance and rule of law, which disseminate “the corporate form of thinking and governance into broader social spheres.” (2011, 83).

But what actually is indicator? Indicator is a “named collection of a rank-ordered data that purports to represent the past or projected performance of different units” (Davis, Kingsbury and Merry 2012). Indicators help to quantify the complex social phenomena and by virtue of making it quantifiable, it also renders social phenomenon comparable. Indicators also “create and define social phenomena by naming them and attaching them to data.” (Merry 2016) According to the functions it performs, indicators are categorized into three groups i.e. counts, ratios and composites. Counts are just like descriptive statistics, ratios involve comparisons and application of mathematical formula, while composites are the combination of both counts and ratios. Composites merge multiple data sources and different kinds of data into a single rank or a score.

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She argues that numbers are not inherently bad. But devoid of theoretical guidance and historical context, it can be partial, distorted and highly misleading, and susceptible to support any kind of claims. This point is aptly elaborated and deserves to be quoted:

“counting things requires making them comparable, which means that they are inevitably stripped of context, history and meaning. Numerical knowledge is essential, yet if it is not closely connected to more qualitative forms of knowledge, it leads to oversimplification, homogenization and the neglect of the surrounding social structures.” (Merry 2016, 2)

While there is plenty written about the topic of conceptualization and operationalization of what is being measured, defining the rights set of indicators, selecting the right set of data etc. in the textbooks of research methodology, under the broader topic of “validity” of the research, however, this research does concern itself with the accuracy of the indicators being used. Rather, it claims that the entire process of making a social phenomenon countable and measurable through labelling indicators is a social and political process and involves value judgments. It is far from being neutral and transparent process and the claim that the knowledge thus produced through these mechanisms is scientific and evidence-based is far from being true. It may be projected as objective and free from political bias, but in fact, it is deeply ideological in its nature and embedded “in the regimes of power within which they are formed (Merry 2016, 4).

Merry adopts Foucault’s genealogical method (1978; 2012) to understand the processes behind the statistically based knowledge and raise questions about how indicators develop, people and institutions involved in the process, the financiers and sponsors and which of the features are settled at the end of the process. She argues that measurements are usually based on the prior approaches and models, which are either refined and translated according to the new circumstances. More often than not, these frameworks of measurements are developed in the global north by the technical experts particularly in the fields of economics, statistics and political sciences, but used in various contexts around the globe. This also entails translation of data instruments and indicators to fit-in the local circumstances. Translation is informed by many constraints and issues like availability of the relevant data in the local context, financial constraints, the use of proxies and commensuration of indicators. It often happens that researchers rely on existing government statistics or send questionnaires to the local experts instead of conducting a comprehensive survey. Existing datasets are massaged to fit-in the research framework. In fact, what happens is that the existence of the data

becomes a decisive factor which dictates what indicators are to be identified and selected.

Indicators as technology of knowledge creation also involve the underlying processes of prioritizing indicators and making them commensurable. The commensuration is a process of rendering wide range of practices, socio-economic structures and systems into compatible and equivalent categories. It involves considerable reframing and cultural work (Espeland and Sauder 2012). Making discreet things commensurable means “identifying a core principle that they all share and that renders them various instances of the same thing.” (Merry 2016, 27). Similarly, once the political process of naming the indicators is complete, these indicators are then prioritized and values attached to them according the judgment of the researcher or the institution conducting the study. Hence, before the final conclusion of the study is reached, there are numerous instances of value judgments and opinions during the research process, which belie the notions of scientific objectivity and impartiality. with these consideration, the following section analyses the quantitative efforts to understand, define and measure the concept of democracy in Pakistan.

Discussion and Analysis:

The work on the measurement of democratic processes in Pakistan is carried by an independent research institution “Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency” (PILDAT). It was established in 2001 during the dictatorial regime General Musharraf, as a non-partisan political and public policy research think-tank, dedicated to the development of democratic institutions in Pakistan. The major focus of this institution is to identify state of democracy and public institution in the country. PILDAT publishes two separate annuals reports i.e. “Assessment of the Quality of Democracy in Pakistan” and “Internal Democracy of Major Political Parties of Pakistan”. These reports carry quantitative attempts to define and measure the presence or absence of democratic elements, based on particular indicators.

This section discusses the both the annual reports published by PILDAT i.e. “Internal Democracy in Political Parties of Pakistan 2016” and “The State of Democracy in Pakistan 2017”. The reports attempt to create knowledge about the state of democracy through the technology of indicators. In the report on “internal democracy in political parties in Pakistan”, the measurement process of democracy is carried through a framework consisting of eleven (11) indicators. A representative sample of Eight major political parties from across the country is selected for the study, which were then evaluated and ranked according the scores they received on the following indicators.

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Democratic character of the party constitution

Regular and competitive party elections

Effectiveness of intra-party structures

Regular meetings of parliamentary parties

Tradition of annual general meetings or conventions

Discouragement of dynastic leadership

Regular change in party leadership

A broad funding base and credible party accounts

Tolerance of dissent within the party

A democratic decision-making process

Active participation of women, youth and minorities in the party affairs

These indicators were presented in the form of questions and measured on the scale from 1 to 5, where 1 represented the lowest while 5 represented as highest score.

How much democracy does the party constitution guarantee within the party?

How regularly and competitively does the party hold intra-party elections?

How effective are the various bodies of the party and how frequently do they meet?

How regularly the parliamentary party meetings take place during the sessions of the Senate, National Assembly and Provincial Assemblies?

How regularly does the party hold its annual convention?

How far does the party discourage the tradition of dynastic leadership?

How often has the top-most party leadership changed during the past 10 years without the death of the party chief?

How wide is the funding base and how credible are the audited accounts of the party?

How far is dissent tolerated within the party? How democratic was the procedure of disciplinary action, if any, against dissenting party officials?

How democratic is the decision making process on important questions of policy? How democratic was the decision-making on the three most important decisions taken by the party during the past one year?

How active is the role and participation of women, youth and minorities in the party?

Following is the result and the ranking based on the scores each political party gained on the indicators.

S. No.	Political Parties	Score
1	The Jamaat-e-Islami (JI)	80 %
2	The National Party (NP)	69 %
3	The Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM)	61 %
4	The Awami National Party (ANP)	61 %
5	The Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F)	59 %
6	The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)	46 %
7	The Pakistan Peoples Party	42 %
8	The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz	40 %

The second report, “The State of Democracy in Pakistan 2017” seems more a semi-quantitative political commentary around certain political variables. The report does not mention that who were involved in the process of evaluation of the state of democracy and which indicators were actually used. However, PILDAT annual report 2013-14 (PILDAT 2014), announced that it was using 25 indicators framework for the assessment of the quality of democracy in the country. But the actual report produced in 2017 does not mention either the indicators and the person behind the evaluation of those indicators. Thus, the final report consists of political analyses by the “experts” of the field, who we don’t know, and is centered around variables of civil-military relations, functioning of judiciary, executive and legislature, and election commission.

The indicators used by the PILDAT are borrowed from the global framework of indicators developed by the Swedish research institute “International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance” or International IDEA. The indicators devised by the International IDEA in its publication, “The Global State of Democracy”, claims to “offer comprehensive global analysis of the challenges facing democracy” (International IDEA 2017). It defines democracy as a “popular control over public decision-making and decision-makers, and political equality between citizens in the exercise of that control.” With the help of ninety-eight (98) indicators, democratic governance is measured on five (5) dimensions i.e. representative government, fundamental rights, checks on government, impartial

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administration and participatory engagement. In the 2017 report, the IDEA ranked 155 countries across the globe according to the internal functioning of democratic institutions and processes in those countries.

When this global quantitative model is translated into local Pakistani context, it becomes a radically transformed version of its original source in terms meaning and concepts, definitions and indicators. It is not only constrained by availability of the datasets but also by lack of technical and professional expertise, unavailability of funds to conduct large scale evaluation or simply due to the fear of challenging the dominant military regime of the country. PILDAT's both research publications nowhere mention what they are actually measuring and the definition of democracy is left to the imagination of the readers. Not defining the concept of democracy leaves the field wide open for cherry-picking of eleven (11) indicators while ignoring the others. It is worth mentioning that the International IDEA bases its definition of democracy on three key elements – popular control, political equality and fundamental rights. But all of the three central elements which lie at the core of democracy are somehow left out from the research projects. Take for example the principle of equality. Pakistan is one of the few countries in the that officially differentiates citizens on the basis of religion. However, the framework developed by PILDAT is meticulously silent about the issues of equality. Similarly, the actual inequalities existing in the society on grounds of gender, class, ethnicity, religion etc. are not touched upon.

Furthermore, another problem with the translation of the instrument was the datasets used in the research. The international IDEA used expert surveys, observational (primary) data, official archives and reports, research and reference works (International IDEA 2017, 281). However, PILDAT data for the report on “internal democracy in political parties” is provided by a survey conducted from the members of PILDAT steering committee. This committee consists of 12 members only, half of them are professional journalists and the other half, politicians. No reasons are provided about the selection criteria of these members. It is this committee of twelve members which provided responses to the items on the questionnaires on the scale ranging from 1 to 5, thus, raising serious questions about the validity and generalizability of the research work. Thus, behind the veil of quantitative data and objective indicators lies normative decision making, and the compromises of technical, financial, and ideological and political nature.

Decontextualization and homogenization are other problems associated with quantification of social phenomenon. The approach often adopted by quantitative research is to see society as an aggregate of individuals and its characteristics to be the sum-total characteristics of its constituting members. This tendency ignores

invisible social structures that act upon individuals. Furthermore, by reducing phenomenon to numbers, what it essentially does, is to erase the social complexities. At the same time, it also gives rise to mutually exclusive and rigid categories, which does not correspond to social reality. This rigid mathematical model instead of representing the reality, becomes a reality in its own right. It narrows down the political discourse and determines what can be said and what cannot be said. Since research is a social and collective enterprise (Latour 1987, Davis, Kingsbury and Merry 2012, Merry 2016), it is strongly implicated on the power structures of the society.

The capacity to decontextualize the social reality is evident when indicators are used as technology of knowledge creation. In our case, democracy is taken not as a continuous social process, having historical specificities, but as an event or an instance of a history. Understanding complex social phenomena like democracy require not technical expertise but theoretical and historical understanding of socio-economic and political institutions, processes and principles. These are simply not captured by numbers. For example, one can easily study the constitution of the country for its guarantees of freedoms and protection of human rights and then reduce it to some numerical scale. But this simplistic way of measuring “democraticness” of the state ignores all sets of issues involving the state society relationship, power structures and social conflicts in the society. If we look at the first question asked in the survey questionnaire, “how much democracy does the party constitution guarantee within the party?”, by mere act of writing a democratic manifesto does not imply that it will be strictly adhered to. But nonetheless, it can boost party credentials as a democratic party.

Similarly, the reports also categorize the history of the country into “democratic periods” and periods of “military dictatorships”, which is highly misleading. It ignores the fact that in the postcolonial history of Pakistan, the politics is being dominated by the military bureaucracy throughout. There have not been any democratic or dictatorial periods but a continuity of army’s dominance, sometimes directly taking over the reins of the government and other times, pulling the strings from behind the scene. These reports give illusion of democracy which in fact is not there. Quantitative data is severely constraint to capture historical data, thus, it conveniently ignores history. The fact that the political leadership and political parties were the creation of military is simply lost on the quantitative data.

If we look from the perspective of governance, datafication is linked with the neoliberal form of governmentality, which often emphasizes the primacy of technical governance over politics (Merry 2016, Piattoeva 2015). It is evident from the fact that the report on the state of democracy in Pakistan, the focus is on the

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institutions rather than on the social processes. This view is quite prevalent that the society and its problems can be “fixed” with the right set of institutional reforms, evidence based policies and best practices. It does not occur to the researchers that democracy is a continuous social process, supported by the participation of all segments of society at all levels. Democracy cannot be confined to few institutional practices like assuming the political offices or counting the number of party meetings. But the reports make no reference to the political participation of the masses and their ability to involve in the critical debates about the issues of social inequalities on various grounds, military dominance, redistributive justice etc.

Another important aspect of datafication of social sciences is assigning weightage or value to indicators and making them commensurable. What it means in research that not all indicators carry equal importance. Some indicators are more important than others. If we look at indicators of internal democracy, the initial four indicators are assigned 13% weightage or value while the rest of seven indicators are assigned 7% importance in mathematical calculations. The attachment of value to indicators is complete arbitrary and depends on political and ideological inclination of the research’s team or the institution behind the research. If we compare the fourth indicator i.e. regular meetings of parliamentary parties to the eleventh indicator which is the number of women, youth and minorities having party membership, both do not carry same importance, according to the researchers. The frequency of inter-party meetings is assigned double importance as compared to the participation of women and religious minorities in the party. One can easily find ideological tilts in what is presented as an objective quantitative study.

Conclusion

The present day Pakistan is far from being democratic. The irony is that the political party which is ranked top according to the democratic indicators, “Jamati-Islami (JI)” is known to be in Pakistan as an ultra-rightwing party with high militant tendencies. Although student politics is officially banned in universities, but the student wing of JI are tacitly allowed to operate in the campuses and are notorious for their activities (Rodriguez 2011). They are often in news for beating fellow students, thrashing political opponents and moral policing in the campuses (Mandokhail 2018) . There are several incidences in Punjab University, the biggest university in the country, when the members of JI student wing thrashed male students for having chat with his female colleagues (Staff 2019, Gabol 2018).

Furthermore, democracy cannot be conceived without reference to basic human rights. The discrimination faced by religious and ethnic minorities in Pakistan is no secret. There have been many instances of arson, lynching and forced conversion of religious minorities in Pakistan. The discriminatory laws enacted by the state like “blasphemy laws” have resulted in many attacks on minorities and has created a permanent fear for religious minorities in the country. Similarly, no reference has been made to the issues of extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, suppressing dissent and media censorship. Thousands of the people are abducted by security agencies of the country and are still missing (Staff 2019).

To conclude, the effort to quantitatively measure the state of democracy in the country and within political parties through technology of indicators may give the façade of objectivity to the results, but much is lost during the process. The process of understanding social phenomena through numbers gives rise to a peculiar form of knowledge which is static, ahistorical, decontextualized and homogenizes the social complexity. As we have seen in this example, numbers cannot only be misleading, but have the ability to create the things which it wants to measure. The quantitative understanding of democracy also conceals the political and ideological processes in selection or rejection of the indicators, like ignoring issues of social justice, rule of law, protection of disadvantaged groups etc. Its subjective nature is also evident while attaching different importance to different indicators for mathematical calculations.

Finally, the comparative element of the research is completely mission. One of the important aspect of numerically based knowledge is that it renders social phenomenon comparable and commensurable. The comparative advantage of the numerical data is not capitalized on but in fact completely ignored. The research projects do not provide any comparative frame of reference to see how well democracy is performing in Pakistan as compared to other south Asian countries like India, Bangladesh or Sri Lanka. The so called Pakistani exceptionalism of being an “ideological state” and being different from rest of the world, has discouraged comparative research in social sciences. It seems that the PILDAT research also operates within the broader ideological framework of Pakistan as an “Islamic State” with military as a guardian of its geographical and ideological frontiers. This is perhaps the key element which gives shape to entire research project of PILDAT.

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