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Digital Pakistan

Idea, Potential and Challenges

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While the leadership has been pushing for a "Digital Pakistan" over the years, the process has remained slow due to several gaps that are yet to be addressed.

Image Source: Dawn

In August 2021, Pakistan President Dr Arif Alvi addressed the Digital Government Summit organized by the Ministry of IT & Telecom. The official Twitter handle of the President quoted him from the summit, wherein he said, "Well-timed digitization can catapult Pakistan to progress." He outlined the importance of data analysis in decision-making processes in the future.

Prior to this, in March, the Federal Minister for IT said, "Pakistan is on the verge of digital revolution as we see progress happening in the country on a daily basis..." Initiating the Digital Pakistan 2021 Policy, he said the policy aims at "citizen empowerment and economic prosperity" of the country.

The Minister was right in saying so as Pakistan's digital footprint has been on the rise and is likely to expand further. [1]

The Idea of "Digital Pakistan"

The concept of "Digital Pakistan" is not new and was introduced in 2017, focusing on access and connectivity, digital infrastructure, e-government services, digital skills and training, and entrepreneurship. Approved by the then federal cabinet

under the PML-N in May 2018, the policy aimed to boost the IT sector and enhance the infrastructural and institutional facilities. The policy was approved, in light of the Economic Survey 2016-17, which highlighted that Pakistan's IT sector had generated USD 3.3 billion revenue. Therefore, a dedicated policy as Digital Pakistan was welcomed by the sector. However, the approval of the policy took place weeks prior to the 2018 elections; subsequently, other political parties launched their own plans for the sector in their elections manifestos.[2]

The PTI launched its draft digital policy which promised an investment worth USD two billion in the IT sector. The party projected its policy as a solution to corruption, debt, and unemployment. (Jamal Shahid, "PTI will invest $2bn in IT sector under digital policy," Dawn, 4 July 2018) Dawn explains that following the PTI, the PPP launched its own proposed approach to the IT sector, but failed to include an action plan on the same.[3]

Imran Khan and the new Vision

In 2019, Prime Minister Imran Khan launched the "Digital Pakistan Vision." He said the Vision had been "designed for the government and the private sector to work towards a digitally progressive and inclusive Pakistan." At the time, he expressed regrets that he had not given due importance to Digital Pakistan but was confident that the youth and women would be able to benefit from the initiative. He also outlined the importance of e-governance and e-commerce, claiming, "The country will experience a quantum leap ahead."[4]

The 2021 policy is a revamp of all the above. In the financial year 2020-21, for the first time, IT exports crossed the USD two billion mark and recorded a 47.4 per cent increase; IT exports for the year were recorded at USD 2.12 billion against the USD 1.44 billion in the financial year 2019-20.[5]One reason behind this could be rapid adaptation to the digital space in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Further, the positive development in the export figures indicate that the foreign players see potential in Pakistan's digital arena.[6]

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[1] "'Digital Pakistan Policy 2021 Road Show'," *Business Recorder*, 25 March 2021

[2] "Digital Pakistan," *Dawn*, 29 May 2018, Ramsha Jahangir, "Situationer: The 'Digital Pakistan' challenge," *Dawn*, 3 January 2020

[3] Asra Rizwan, "What tech-centric policies are political parties offering in their election manifestos?," *Dawn*, 18 July 2018

[4] "'Full potential of youth, women will be unleashed,' says PM on launch of Digital Pakistan Vision," *Dawn*, 5 December 2019

[5] "IT exports cross record $2bn mark," *Dawn*, 27 July 2021

[6] Irfan Wahab Khan, "Realizing a Digital Pakistan," *Dawn*, 13 December 2020

The potential of Digital Pakistan

An opinion in Daily Times says that Pakistan is in a position to play a key role in the global economy within a decade because of the country's improvement in the digital arena. The author estimates the above by reasoning that over 100 million people of Pakistan's 220 million-strong population has the potential to explore the global economy in the decade. The author says these avenues have been strengthened by various policy initiatives, including Digital Pakistan. Further, around 70 per cent of the population has access to the internet; the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority's latest figures indicate that over 90 million Pakistanis avail 3G/4G services. This is expected to boost innovation and job creation among the population.[7]

Meanwhile, Tania Aidrus, who had been the face of Digital Pakistan, outlines five avenues that could help realize the idea of a Digital Pakistan. These include a digital identity or "universal biometric digital identity"; a digital data which is a "digital repository of personal data and records"; digital signatures; digital payments and lastly, digital services for personalized services.[8]

Similarly, Atta-Ur-Rehman, in an opinion, listed out several initiatives to bring the digital to the mainstream, including reducing the price of bandwidth, formulating a National IT policy in 2000, expanding fiber access across cities and setting up IT universities. Later, under PM Imran Khan's governance beginning 2018, three PM task forces IT and Telecom, Science and Technology and Knowledge Economy were formed to enhance Pakistan's digital capacity.[9]

Realizing Digital Pakistan: Three Challenges

However, as promising as the above initiatives and suggestions seem, Pakistan is yet to address certain gaps.

First, technical challenges and lack of a long-term vision. This includes the need to ensure cybersecurity, better undertaking of public sector automation, need for a long-term commitment instead of framing policies for short-term outcomes, and balancing between digital priorities and traditional businesses.[10] Aidrus also opines that isolated achievements do not contribute to the larger aim of Digital Pakistan unless there is a broad and sustained pursual of the goal. She highlights that digitization and enhancement of, say, a start-up culture, cannot be initiated by the schemes alone and calls for "bold reforms by the State Bank, the Securities & Exchange Commission of Pakistan and the Federal Board of Revenue."

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[7] Julian Gorman, "Pakistan's digital transformation," *The Daily Times*, 30 July 2021, "Digital Transformation: A growing landscape in Pakistan," *The News International*, 27 March 2020, Huzaima Bukhari & Dr Ikramul Haq, "Morbid taxation of digital Pakistan," The News International, 23 May 2021
[8] Tania Aidrus, "Decoding Digitisation," *Dawn*, 12 June 2021
[9] Atta-Ur-Rahman, "A digital Pakistan," *The News International*, 11 December 2021
[10] Muhammad Umar, "Points to note for a national digital policy," *Dawn*, 29 January 2018

Second, increased curbs on digital freedom. Recent measures like introduction of taxes on mobile calls and internet are likely to deter people's move towards digitization. Aidrus tweeted that "taxing the internet further is regressive" which will impede the Digital Pakistan initiative. Furthermore, new rules under the PECA and PEMRA, and bans on apps like TikTok do not operate in favour of digitization and could prevent further foreign investors from exploring Pakistan's digital market. Such moves also reflect the government's overarching methods to monitor a common Pakistani's digital activities and raises concerns over data protection and privacy, thereby jeopardizing its own vision.

Third, the social challenges. Access to the digital space is unequal; though millions have access to the internet, the population is largely digitally illiterate. Therefore, there is a divide between different classes of society, between the privileged and marginalized. This transcends to a gender divide as well. For example, access to mobile wallets is restricted wherein there is a "38 percent gender gap in mobile phone ownership (the highest in South Asia) and a 49 per cent gender gap in internet usage." Further, Pakistan also has a poor performance record on the Economist Intelligence Unit's Inclusive Internet Index and ranks at the bottom in Asian countries. The pandemic exposed these differences; an opinion says, "Digital access remains heavily reliant on income levels, geographic locations and gender..."[11]

A few suggestions by experts to achieve the goals of Digital Pakistan include making digital access a fundamental right, promoting digital literacy, digitization of the government and public sector, engaging with the private sector to develop the country's digital ecosystem, addressing the gender gap and rethinking the "regressive levies" and lastly, envisioning a long-term strategy. Therefore, unless the required measures are not taken, the grand policies showcased will remain static without translating into reality; this is because promoting "Digital Pakistan" is not a solution "if digital Pakistan remains beyond the reach of most Pakistanis."

Note: Parts of this PR Insight were published in a short note on the PR Evening Briefs here.

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[11] Aliza Amin, "Technology: Towards a real Digital Pakistan," *Dawn*, 6 June 2021, Amber Darr, "The digital divide," *Dawn*, 17 December 2020

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