

## NGOs and Elite Press Discourse in Pakistan: A Framing Analysis

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### Abstract

Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) have emerged as important sociopolitical actors in the larger socio-political landscape of Pakistan. Lately, NGOs have come under heated debates both in the political and public discourses in Pakistan. Although there is a considerable scholarship on the role of NGOs in the public sector development, there is scant literature on how the NGOs are framed in the mediated discourse. Addressing this question is important because the public opinion about NGOs formed by the media could have implications for the legitimacy of the NGOs and the services they render. Using framing theory and qualitative textual analysis as methodological approach, this study aims to dwell on how NGOs are framed in the editorial genres of the elite newspapers of Pakistan. The analysis identified three major frames within which the NGOs are discussed in the English press of Pakistan viz. welfare frame, threat frame and accountability frame. The analysis reveals that NGOs are represented positively in most of the editorials. However, certain newspapers have also supported the new NGOs regulation policy promulgated by Pakistan. The study concludes that despite the global critical voices on NGOs, the news media in Pakistan mostly favourably frame the NGOs and their working in Pakistan and that NGOs are depicted as important actors doing welfare activities in the Pakistani society. The findings are discussed in the light of the possible political and institutional reasons due to which the NGOs are portrayed favorably in the elite press discourses of Pakistan.

**Keywords:** NGOs, Pakistan, framing theory, qualitative analysis, editorials

### Introduction

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have emerged as important sociopolitical actors in the post-war era and constitute an important entity of the civil society in the global context. The concept of NGOs is a contested one in the development discourse with not clear conceptualizations of the term 'NGO'. Thus NGOs, civil society, third sector, and non-profit organizations are interchangeably used to refer to the non-governmental organizations in Pakistan and elsewhere. However, the common arena for all the terminologies is that they constitute an arena where individuals from various walks of life come together to pursue their common goals and interests for the collective welfare of society with no intention of profit making or political power. These are voluntary and formerly structured organizations not related to the state or business sector (Salamon, 1993) but focus on collective action, human condition, or human well-being (Gibelman & Gelamn, 2004). World Bank conceptualizes NGOs as:

Private organizations that pursue activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, or undertake community development (World Bank Report, 1999). The concept of voluntary work is not a new one in Pakistan and in the larger region of South Asia. It has existed in Pakistan with the very emergence of the state of Pakistan in 1947. Although not referred to as NGOs at that time, many voluntary and social welfare organizations had started to provide humanitarian aid and rehabilitation work to the refugees and marginalized coming to the newly formed state of Pakistan because of the partition of the Indian sub-continent into India and Pakistan. These voluntary organizations of that time were set up by some prominent and affluent personalities especially by those women who had played a pivotal role during the Pakistan Movement demanding a separate state for most of the then Sub-continent. The focus of these voluntary organizations was limited to rehabilitation and to provide with basic health facilities and shelter to the poor of the newly emerged Muslim State (*Asian Development Report, 1999*). Some of the voluntary organizations of that time remain active in Pakistan although their role may have changed over the time.

In the contemporary times, NGOs are deeply embedded in the sociopolitical landscape of Pakistan with their formerly structured organizational bases having intervention in various fields including education, health, environment, rural development, social welfare, and community development etcetera and have been acclaimed for their vital contribution to solve and support government policies vis-à-vis societal issues (Imtiaz, 2016). NGOs have become important power players in the larger power structure of Pakistan and are catalysts for creating awareness and public mobilization on various issues. Since in the early 1990s, the number of NGOs has mushroomed noticeably because of opening policy of the state toward the NGOs and non-for-profit sector in Pakistan. The process of deregulation and privatization, globalization and the general global surge of nonprofit sector and its increasing prominence in several social sector interventions led to the global surge of NGOs including in the developing nations (Najam, 2000). It is highly speculative to estimate the exact number of NGOs currently working in Pakistan; their number is in thousands and has increased significantly over the years. According to a statistic given by the Asian Development Bank (2009) about the NGOs and

civil society organizations in Pakistan, there are around 45,000 nonprofit organizations working in the nonprofit sector in Pakistan (ADB, 2009). NGOs have strategically intervened in the politics, media, academia, and the larger civil society arena of Pakistan.

Globally NGOs have emerged important players for the development and act as sociopolitical institutions involved in the development-oriented work to serve the communal needs and external constituencies (Ghosh, 2009). NGOs are also important tools of spreading neoliberal values around the world. In recent times NGOs have come under heated debate regarding their functioning, governance, and accountability within Pakistan and in the global arena. de Souza (2010) argues that NGOs have come under heavy criticism in recent times in the global arena for their increased partnership across the state and business sector for compromising their goals, their top-heavy bureaucracies, wasteful procedures and overlapping missions which led unnecessary competition and duplication of services and programs. NGOs have also been criticized for their development paradigms in the post-colonial societies with no visible impact on poverty on rural development and their failure to challenge the state and market forces (Hussain (2016).

Recently, NGOs have come under heated debates in both political and public discourses in Pakistan vis-à-vis their role, functioning, governance, funding, accountability, and their alleged anti-state activities. The current regime in Pakistan promulgated a new NGO policy in 2015 regarding registering and monitoring the NGOs and INGOs (International-Nongovernmental Organizations) operating in Pakistan (*Dawn*, 2015). This new policy of NGOs/INGOs was criticized and condemned by the human rights activists and NGOs operating terming it as an oppressive step (*Aljazeera*, 2013). NGOs have also come under critique in Pakistan regarding the regulatory framework and outdated regulation and registration policies (Imtiaz, 2106). The public perceptions about NGOs in Pakistan vary from one social class to another. In her study Bano (2008) has revealed that 'NGO' is a contested concept in Pakistan with highly negative perception among the religious and conservative segments of society. A significant number of people in Pakistan think that through NGOs the West particularly the US wants to control over the entire world and promoting western values for monetary gains.

In the arena of communication and media, there is scant of scholarship on media discourses on NGOs. Studies conducted by Ganesh (2005) focuses on the organizational and interpersonal communication within NGOs, framing of NGOs in the media by (de Souza, 2010) and scandals and wrongdoings of NGOs by (Gibelman & Gelman, 2004, 2001). In their study Kee, Ibrahim, Basri and Nie (2011) have revealed that like governments, NGOs use the media to frame issues in getting public support and legitimacy for their development initiatives. Media also documents stories about NGOs and their wrongdoings (Gibelman & Gelman, 2004). However, most of the previous studies have been conducted in the context of the NGOs operating in the Western world and the media discourses therein.

In the academic scholarship in Pakistan, scant scholarly attention has been given to unravel how the NGOs are talked about in the media discourses of Pakistan. Keeping in view that NGOs have deeply rooted in the landscape of Pakistan, this study aims to fulfill the existing gap in the literature on the media framing and representation of NGOs in the Pakistani media discourses. It also aims to contribute to understanding the unexplored relationship between the NGOs and the media in Pakistan where both media and NGOs have emerged as important actors of civil society and are deeply rooted in the public discourse of Pakistan. Thus, the broader question the study aims to address is how the NGOs are framed in the elite news discourse of Pakistan. Are they NGOs portrayed as legitimate actors in the elite press given their ubiquity in Pakistan? Using the framing theory as theoretical framework, the study asks: How NGOs are framed in the English news media of Pakistan and what dominant frames are used within which the NGOs are talked about in the editorials of the English newspapers of Pakistan? Qualitative analysis is used as methodological tool to unearth the frames used by the elite newspapers in their editorial discourses on NGOs. The newspapers selected for the study are the major English dailies of Pakistan viz. *Dawn*, *The News*, *The Express Tribune*, *The Nation* and *Daily Times* which is a representative sample of the limited English media landscape in Pakistan.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Framing theory as a theoretical paradigm has been widely used in media research and social sciences during the last few decades in understanding how the media construct the social reality (Entman, 1991). Journalists and media organizations use frames to conceptualize and construct meaning and making sense of relevant events both for themselves and for the audiences. Framing is a central organizing idea that provides meanings to an unfolding strip of events (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987). The concept of framing goes back to 1974 when the eminent sociologists Goffman (1974) defined frames as "the principles of organization which govern social events" (p.10). Norris (1995) argues that journalists use frames in their professional work to 'simplify', 'organize', 'prioritize', and structure the narrative flow of information about events and issues. Media scholar Schudson (2003) has noted:

Frames in the media are principles of selection, emphasis, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters.....[framing] is a persistent pattern of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers organize discourse whether verbal or

visual. (p.35) Several studies have used the framing theory as theoretical approach to understand how the news media construct and frame realities about various issues and events by making salience, highlighting and downplaying some aspects of events using various media frames (Entman, 1989, 1991, 2003; Tuchman, 1978; Goffman, 1974; Pan & Kosicki, 1993; Entman (2003, p. 52) has stated:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicative text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment for recommendation for the item described.

Iyengar (1977) has explained that the news frames are frequently drawn from and reflect of the shared cultural narratives, frames and stereotypes that are rooted in the larger socio-cultural contexts. Similarly, Gitlin (1980) notes “frames are largely unspoken and unacknowledged; organize the world both for the journalists who report it and, to some important degree, for us who rely on their reports” (p.7). Likewise, Lewis and Reese (2009) have argued that frames are tools used by the social actors to structure reality and are “often embedded in and resonate with the everyday culture, and thus are considered normal and natural, their impact is by stealth” (p.3). Thus, the news frames direct the public how to think about an issue, legitimizing certain viewpoints and excluding others from the public discourses through the process of framing or what (Schudson, 2003) ‘media bias. News is argued to be a constructed reality of the world by news institutions and their reporters by selection, highlighting, shaping, shading, including, and excluding of events and issues in their reportage. Such news framing of events and issues is noted to be affected by national interest, national journalistic culture, and editorial policies of the media organizations (Archetti, 2010). Media frames are inevitable in the organizing and making sense of the events by the media professionals. In the current study we are particularly interested to examine what dominant frames the news media used to frame the NGOs and their work in Pakistan. Exploring this is timely as the NGOs in recent times have come under much public discussion both in the media and public discourse in Pakistan.

### **Materials and Methods**

Using qualitative research as a methodological tool, this study attempts to answer how the elite English press of Pakistan has framed NGOs in their editorials which is a form of news genres. We used qualitative method as it allows the researcher to discern implicit patterns and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and goes beyond counting explicit words or phrases. Qualitative analysis allows the reader to adopt more flexibility in the analysis over the quantitative analysis. This qualitative analysis aims to dig into more in-depth analysis to reveal the nuances and subtleties embedded in the media text. For that purpose, Gamson and Modigliani’s (1989) constructionists’ approach to discourse analysis was adopted to reveal the ‘interpretive packages’ in the media discourses on NGOs in the editorials of the elite press of Pakistan. To that end, first all the editorials pertaining to the NGOs were deconstructed into their constitutive elements to identify the major framing devices namely word choices, phrases, exemplars, metaphors, key words, and lexicons (Entman, 1989). In the second step the researcher reconstructed these framing devices into what Gamson and Modigliani (1989) called ‘ideological packages’ to reveal the dominant narratives or frames or what Hall (1980) calls the ‘dominant reading’ used in the editorial’s genres of the selected newspapers English press in Pakistan.

The corpus of the study for analysis consists of all the editorials written on NGOs from June 2015 to September 2016 in the elite English newspapers of Pakistan. The rationale for selecting this period is during it much discourse and debate was going in Pakistan and internationally regarding the NGOs and their registration and regulation in Pakistan. It was during this period that the government promulgated a new NGOs policy in Pakistan and during the same time period many NGOs were banned from working inside Pakistan and registrations of many was cancelled for their alleged ‘anti-state’ activities. The word NGOs is generic one here that indicates both national and international nongovernmental organizations working in Pakistan. Scholars have argued that despite the prevalence of TV media and internet as alternative media, newspaper are still considered to be an important site to explain events or issues in more details and are read for in-depth information and perspectives on news and events by the readers (Dickson, 1992; Salman et al., 2011). The sample of the newspapers is *Dawn*, *The Express Tribune*, *The News*, *The Nation* and *Daily Times*. These are representative newspapers of English journalism landscape in Pakistan and are widely read and influential in the policies making process in Pakistan (Onyedbadi, 2016, Rasul et al., 2015).

### **Findings and Analysis**

Using the approach of the qualitative content analysis technique, the texts on the NGOs were read multiple times to reveal the major themes or clusters while keeping in mind the research questions about how the editorials talk about NGOs and the new policy on NGOs in the elite newspapers of Pakistan. During the analysis attention was also paid to the framing devices like key words, phrases, metaphors, images, lexicons, narrative structure and overall sense of the text. Qualitative content analysis is useful in analyzing both the manifest and latent messages of the texts and is argued to be well suited in revealing the ideological stance, themes, topics, and dominant frames in the texts (Berg, 2001). The analysis revealed

many similar themes in the editorial discourses with a similar frame and narrative. All similar themes or categories with a similar over all sense or narrative were put into one frame or category to eliminate the repetition or duplication. For instance, 'role of NGOs', 'good work', 'help marginalized', 'provide basic amenities' were merged to form 'welfare frame'. Likewise, 'uncertain times for NGOs', 'salvo against NGOs', 'crackdown on NGOs' formed the 'Threat Frame' and 'foreign spies', 'corruption', 'unfettered', 'covert operations' were merged to form 'accountability frame'. The analysis identified three frames: Welfare Frame, Threat Frame and Accountability Frame. In the following these frames are discussed in more detail.

### **Welfare Frame**

A prominent frame emerged from the media discourse is the welfare frame, which states primarily about the development work the NGOs are doing in the far-flung areas of Pakistan where even the state has been unable to reach. Within this frame the NGOs are portrayed as inevitable for Pakistan and its social development using the words like 'doing vital work' 'builds the capacity of Pakistan'. NGOs are mainly talked about for their social work and helping to fill the gap between the state and its citizenry. NGOs within this framed are praised for their social services in health, education, disaster, poverty reduction and human rights and reaching out to the marginalized communities which the state and its institutions have failed to reach out or do not want at all. The overall narrative structure within this frame is highly positive about NGOs as they are inevitable for Pakistan as seen in the following excerpt:

There are no viable alternatives available to the essential services provided by many NGOs and their closure means that some of our most impoverished citizens will have to go without their only source of support (*The Express Tribune*, March 12, 2016).

This frame puts the NGOs in highly positive position for the readers that the NGOs are pivotal for the marginalized communities of Pakistan who will suffer if the NGOs and their services were not there. At the same time, the word 'only' tells that the NGOs are the only support the disadvantaged people have and there is no alternative including the state to help these neglected segments of society. Here is another excerpt that shows the NGOs are doing good job and state should avoid punishing the NGOs in the name of regulation, transparency and vague allegations.

INGOs and NGOs are doing vital work in Pakistan, helping fill the gaps where the state is derelict in its duties to its people. Security is not simply about protecting the dark corners of state and society, but also about human security-providing basic services to the disadvantaged sections of the public that the state has been unable to protect (*Dawn*, February 24, 2016).

At the end of the day, these organizations [NGOs] help thousands that are beyond the governments reach (*The Nation*, June 13, 2015). There remain questions over how much attention will actually be paid to the good work that most INGOs are able to perform in the country in terms of delivering human rights target targets and welfare to the people of the country (*The News*, October 4, 2015).

In the aforementioned text the NGOs are portrayed very positively for their contribution to the Pakistani society. At the same time the newspaper is very critical about the role of the state with respect to fulfilling its obligations towards its citizenry. The narrative structure suggests that the NGOs are 'good' and the state and its apparatuses are 'unable' and failed to provide the marginalized segments of the population with basic human needs which is fundamentally the job of the state. The word 'derelict' tells a very negative tone towards the relevant institutions of Pakistan who have ignored deliberately the sufferings of the poor people of Pakistan. The overall sense of the editorials is very pro-NGO and anti-NGO policies the government has recently introduced. The welfare frame constructs the NGOs in positive representations and critically the Pakistani state and its actions against the NGOs.

### **Table 1.**

*Dominant frames appeared in the elite press on NGOs in Pakistan*

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1. Threat frame
  2. Accountability frame
  3. Welfare frame
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### **Threat Frame**

Most of the editorial discourses come within the threat frame stating the promulgation of a new NGO policy is a threat to the NGOs who have been doing good work in tense environment in Pakistan. Most of the editorials written on the NGOs were event-specific primarily discussing the new NGO policy by the interior ministry of Pakistan and how the new policy is a threat to the NGOs. The dominant argument within this frame was with the new NGO policy the autonomy of the NGOs is under threat and the state and security apparatus wan to shrink the space for the NGOs who are doing great work

in Pakistan which the state has been unable to do. The newspapers in their discourses have shown that the new NGO policy will close many NGOs and their services in Pakistan and put them in a state of uncertainty. Dawn was very critical pertinent to the new NGO policy and made the military establishment responsible for the new NGO policy as a tool to stifle the foreign funded NGOs. The lexical choices suggested this frame in its title or headlines like ‘Uncertain times for NGOs’ (Dawn, February 24, 2016), ‘First salvo against INGOs’ (Dawn, June 13, 2015). Likewise, The Express Tribune headlined, ‘Crack down on NGOs’ (The Express Tribune, March 11, 2016). The following excerpt shows how the editorials constructed the new NGO policy as a threat to the very NGOs doing good work in Pakistan which the state has failed to do. As before, neither has the interior minister explained why the registration has not been completed so far nor did he state when it will be completed. It almost appears as if the government – and possibly the military establishment behind the scenes-wants foreign NGOs to operate in a state of prolonged uncertainty (Dawn, February 24, 2016).

The dominant narrative within the threat frame was not only the new policy and registration process but also the lethargic and bureaucratic approach of the relevant ministry responsible for the registration and regulation of NGOs. Dawn newspaper stated the new NGO policy as ‘war on NGOs’ in one of its editorials it stated that the “the state’s misguided and dangerous war on NGOs must stop” (Dawn, February 24, 2016). Dawn stated that since the killing of Osama Bin Laden, the NGOs are under threat in Pakistan from the state and its organs. In its editorials Dawn questioned the allegations levied against the NGOs by the interior ministry for their alleged involvement in anti-state activities. As the following excerpt states. More often than not, the term ‘anti-state’ is code for anyone challenging the official narrative, or going against into areas where the establishment prefers to maintain a veil of secrecy and obfuscation (Dawn, June 13, 2015).

Similarly, the newspaper editorials seem to have a very negative representation of Pakistani bureaucracy pertinent to its functioning in Pakistan and the transparency in the implementation of the new NGO policy. As the below excerpts states. Knowing the state of the Pakistani bureaucracy-which causes inordinate delays and remuneration for the smallest act-INGOS are going to find themselves unable to make a difference (The Nation, October 3, 2015).

The threat frame is promoted by narratives about the state and bureaucracy and its malpractices that would suffer the working of NGOs. In this way the NGOs have been presented in a very positive yet vulnerable entity while the state and its policies have been narrated as threat and controlling mechanism vis-à-vis NGOs. The discourse also challenges the allegations and claims made by the state against the NGOs for their alleged involvement in various anti-state activities in Pakistan. As the following excerpts narrates. NGOs have been issued a strange warning to refrain money-laundering, terrorist financing, weapons smuggling, anti-state activities and maintain links with proscribed organizations. They [NGOs] have been warned not to be involved in activities against Pakistan’s national interests or government policy. The first part of this dire warning appears to be without any tangible grounds, since no INGOs has yet been accused of terrorist financing in a court of money-laundering (The News, October 4, 2015).

Within the threat frame NGOs have been portrayed as vulnerable to state and state policies. The NGOs within this frame have been presented positively while the state and state organs have been mainly presented negatively. The state and its allegations levied against the NGOs have been frequently questioned for lack of transparency and unbiased investigation. A narrative was built that since the killing of Osama Bin Laden, the NGOs in Pakistan have been looked suspiciously by the state apparatuses who want to control the very international nongovernmental organizations in Pakistan. NGOs within this frame are shown to be vulnerable to the state and its policies in the name of ‘national interests’ and have been constructed as doing-good but passive actors to challenge the state and its policies. Lexicons like ‘campaigns against NGOs’, ‘misplaced understanding of NGOs’ and ‘threat’ suggest that the new NGO policy promulgated by the state is a threat to the survival of NGOs in Pakistan. As the following excerpts suggest. At the root of the government’s campaigns against NGOs is a misplaced understanding of security. The interior ministry and the intelligence apparatus appear to regard NGOs, particularly of the foreign variety, as the threat to the safety and security of Pakistan (Dawn, Feb 24, 2016). The threat to NGOs is also from the extremist elements of Pakistani society. Here is an excerpt stating it: NGOs are also the favorite whipping boy of conservative social elements, for much of their work involves confronting existing mores, especially where they pertain to the rights of the women and marginalized communities. All these elements combine to create a perfect storm against NGOs in the country (Dawn, June 13, 2015).

The narrative structure of such discourse frames the new NGO policy by the state as unjustified and not a rationale moves while the NGOs have been presented as posing no threat to the state and its security. The overall sense of this frame is that the state and its actions are against the NGOs and the state apparatus wants to limit the activities of the NGOs in the name of security threat- which is an unwarranted claim on the part of the state.

### **Accountability Frame**

Editorials within this frame implicated NGOs of wrongdoings therefore must be regulated. This frame appears in few editorials primarily stating the new NGOs regulation and registration policies by the interior ministry. In stating the

statement of the interior ministry, the editorials supported the surveillance over the NGOs and their functioning. As the below excerpt narrates. The essential purpose behind this policy [INGOs policy] is to make the sure that there is no engagement in money laundering, terrorist financing, weapons smuggling, anti-state activities or maintenance of links with proscribed organizations on the part of the INGOs (Daily Times, October 3, 2015). The editorial implicates that the INGOs might involve in wrongdoings, so the new NGO policy is justified to monitoring their wrongdoings. Thus, the editorial tells the government must act as watchdog of the NGOs as their wrongdoing can be a threat to the security of Pakistan. The following lines further support the government actions to regulate the INGOs. The lack of information and control over the affairs of such non-state bodies has always been a matter of concern, as the unfettered activities of such organizations have the potential to be a security threat. In that regard, the decision to monitor the functioning of the INGOs is a welcome, if belated, move (Daily Times, October 3, 2015).

Questions have often been asked over the unregulated operations of thousands of organizations around the country (The News, October 4, 2015).

Within the frame of accountability, a narrative is constructed that NGOs are doing good, but the state has the right to regulate them. Interestingly the accountability discourse is usually place alongside with the good work the NGOs have been doing as seen in the following editorial. INGOs have been working in Pakistan for almost as long as the state has been in existence. Many of them operate globally and they are recognized and generally respected for the work they do. Every state has a right to regulate the operations of non-governmental entities that it allows to operate within its borders and Pakistan is not an exception to that, and thus there is little surprise that after much to and fro, the government has announced that it developed a policy framework for INGO regulations (The Express Tribune, October 3, 2015). The narrative structure and the overall sense of this discourse supports the state policies of regulation pertinent to NGOs and in a sense resonates with the global discourses of accountability of NGOs for their alleged hidden agendas of the power forces. As the following editorial states. There can be no doubt some of them [NGOs] have been used as vehicles for covert operations by foreign powers, but there is equally no doubt that the health and welfare infrastructure of the country would be considerably reduced in effectiveness without them (The Express Tribune, October 3, 2015).

This discursively negative representation of INGOs builds a case for the accountability of the NGOs for their suspicious activities for the readers. No sources were quoted specifically for the allegations that have been raised against the NGOs rather a universal claim has been made that NGOs are doing bad everywhere and must be doing the same in Pakistan, therefore must be regulated. INGOs are blamed here for the tax evasion to construct a narrative that INGOs are involved in malpractices. As per the law governing the nongovernmental organizations in Pakistan, INGOs are exempted from taxation if they are registered one, however, using a hyperbole that international non-governmental organizations are accused of wrongdoing and having a 'discontent' everywhere in the developing nations the newspaper discursively constructs a narrative to support the regulation and accountability of NGOs. Thus, the actions of the government vis-à-vis overseeing of NGOs have been justified in the aforementioned editorial discourse. Interestingly not a single case was vividly mentioned where the NGOs have been found indulging in wrongdoing rather a generic discourse was discursively constructed with a negative representation of NGOs.

## **Discussion**

In the extant scholarship, scare attention has been paid to the NGOs and their media portrayal despite the fact that NGOs have emerged as important actors in recent times Some studies have focused on the use of the new media by transnational nongovernmental organizations as a public relations tools to promote their images, fund raising and interactions with the public and the journalists (e.g. Seo, Kim & Yang, 2009), synergistic roles of NGOs and news media (Ajmad, Islam and Alam, 2020) and new imflunces of NGOs ( Banks, Schulpen and Brokington, 2020), strategic usage of news media by global NGOs (Vu *et al.*,2020; Li *et al*, 2021; Dzhengiz, Barkemeyer and Napolitano, 2021) less scholarly studies have examined NGOs and their representation in the traditional media sphere in non-western contexts including Pakistan. The current study on media framing study of NGOs in the elite newspapers of Pakistan is arguably the first of its kind as no previous studies have been conducted to reveal the Pakistani media discourses on NGOs. NGOs have emerged as important sociopolitical actors and are deeply embedded in the larger polity of Pakistan, yet these very nongovernmental organizations have also become a contested phenomenon in a conservative society like Pakistan owing to their neoliberal agenda and the challenges they pose to the conservative elements within Pakistan including the state itself. Given the institutional failures and ineffective state policies, the non-governmental organizations have become key development players "to reach people that the state is unable to help or unwilling to prioritize assistance towards" (*Dawn*, October 3, 2015).

The newspapers in this study frame the NGOs as significant entities with their public legitimacy as the NGOs have been doing vital work for the otherwise neglected and marginalized communities of Pakistan. The overall representation of NGOs in the Pakistani elite press discourses is in favorable terms. This positive representation of NGOs in Pakistani press is a deviation from the previous studies on NGOs where they have been associated with wrongdoings and scandals

(Gibelman & Gelman, 2004, 2001). One obvious reason for this prevalently positive portrayal of NGOs is the widening gap between the state and the citizenry where the former has been unable to protect and deliver to the latter. Secondly, both NGOs and media are part of the larger civil society in Pakistan and act as bridge between the public and the government and share many commonalities including serving the public or communities through their professional obligations and services they render to society. The newspapers were cautious in supporting and justifying the new NGO policy by the state vis-à-vis regulation and registration as such policy may hurt the very good work of nongovernmental organizations in Pakistan and could be misused by the state apparatus to stifle the NGOs and their working specifically in the war-ravaged zones of Pakistan where the NGOs have been doing great work. Thus, the newspapers particularly *Dawn* with its liberal outlook seems very critical toward the state and its new policies pertinent to NGOs and has questioned the transparency in regulating the NGOs and the allegations levied against the NGOs by the interior ministry of Pakistan. Most of the editorials juxtaposed what the interior minister said about the NGOs and the welfare work the NGOs are doing to portray the NGOs in positive representation.

The newspapers especially *The Nation* and *The Express Tribune* reinforced the allegations levied by the government against the alleged wrongdoings of the NGOs without providing and vivid evidence for such allegations of ‘anti-state’ activities on the part of NGOs. *Dawn* however questions the allegations raised against the NGOs by the interior ministry. In all the editorial discourses the source that was dominantly quoted was the government officials primarily the interior minister. No space for the voices of the NGOs or the larger civil society was given in any of the editorials analyzed. This could be because of the limitation of editorials where mostly issues are discussed briefly and then a policy recommendation is given.

### Conclusion

This study is the first one in the context of Pakistan that provides a baseline for understanding the media framing of NGOs in Pakistan. It concludes that news media framed the NGOs using three dominant frames namely the welfare frame wherein the NGOs are framed as 'doing good' for the society, threat frame wherein NGOs are framed as posing threat to the state and accountability frame wherein the NGOs are framed, they must be made accountable for their actions. The study concludes that overall, the NGOs in news media in Pakistan are portrayed favorably in the elite press discourses of Pakistan. This study has certain limitations so the findings may not be generalized to the larger media landscape in Pakistan. The selected newspapers the big English dailies of Pakistan and is a representative sample given the limited number of English newspapers in Pakistani media sphere. English press is still influential among the elites in Pakistan; however, the findings cannot be generalized to the Urdu and local language press which have a wide circulation and readership in the media landscape of Pakistan. In addition to this limitation, the study focuses only on the editorial genres, future studies focusing on news stories may reveal interesting insights on NGOs. Given the increasing penetration of TV media and new media, the findings may not be generalized to all media outlets in Pakistan. The study recommends that future studies may focus on how the NGOs are framed in the vernacular press especially the widely circulated Urdu and social/online news media in Pakistan to get a comprehensive picture of NGOs in the news media framing in Pakistan.

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