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Governmentality and Digital Power: A Foucauldian Analysis of Pakistan's PECA

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There's a quiet unease that settles in when the language of 'security' begins to sound indistinguishable from the language of care. In recent years, as misinformation has been framed as a global crisis, echoed most recently in the World Economic Forum's *Global Risk Report 2025*, which warns of its potential to undermine societal trust and destabilize governance by deepening divisions (WEF, 2025), states have responded not just with concern but with increasingly elaborate digital regulations. It's difficult not to notice how quickly the language of safety becomes the language of control. Pakistan's 2025 amendments to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), like many such measures worldwide, are framed as pragmatic responses to the dangers of online extremism, disinformation, and moral corrosion. But this framing, while seemingly rational, calls for a deeper interrogation. What does it mean when the state not only polices actions, but begins to quietly shape the terms of speech, the contours of dissent, and even the bounds of thought?

This piece approaches PECA 2025 not simply as a legal reform, but as an entry point into what Michel Foucault describes as '*governmentality*', a form of governance that works not through overt force, but by subtly cultivating behaviors, norms, and subjectivities (Foucault, 1991). What I argue here is that PECA 2025 (National Assembly of Pakistan, 2025) functions less as a shield against cybercrime and more as a digital architecture of discipline. It codifies who gets to speak, what can be said, and how people come to see themselves as governable subjects, often in the name of the national good.

When Michel Foucault first introduced the idea of governmentality, he wasn't offering a neat theory of power: he was troubling it. He was asking us to pay attention to how power works not just through commands or prohibitions, but through more invisible means: routines, habits, institutions, even care. As he put it, governmentality describes a form of governance that goes beyond laws and coercion, involving the shaping of conduct through subtle, indirect techniques (Foucault, 1991; Stanford, 2025).

The word itself fuses *government* and *mentality*, a reminder that ruling is never just about institutions, but about ways of thinking. Government, in this sense, is not limited to states, it's also about how individuals come to govern themselves in line with certain rationalities, ways of seeing, judging, and acting (Britannica, 2025). This makes the concept especially useful in understanding digital regulation, where the state does not always need to censor or arrest. Sometimes, it simply needs to structure the space in which people learn to monitor themselves.

In his 1978 lecture at the College de France, Foucault laid out three elements of governmentality that feel particularly resonant in the age of algorithmic governance (Lawlor & Nale, 2014). First, he described governmentality as a broad system of power, diffused, institutionally embedded and often non-coercive. It operates through policies, bureaucracies, technologies, and discourses that regulate populations without the appearance of domination. Second, he pointed to a historical transformation from sovereign power, which punished visibly, to governance, that shapes conduct through normalization, data, and surveillance. And third, he reminded us that this mode of power didn't appear overnight. It evolved through histories of religion, economics, and political thought, transforming into a sedimented form of power that becomes most oppressive precisely when it feels ordinary.

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A key element that makes governmentality so unsettling and so analytically powerful is its productive nature. Power, in Foucault's formulation, doesn't simply repress, but it also produces. It forms subjects. It shapes desires, habits, and fears. And most crucially, it teaches individuals to participate in their own governance. What Foucault called "the conduct of conduct" or "the art of government" is precisely this, the process by which individuals come to internalize norms and regulate themselves (Dryzek, Honig & Phillips, 2006).

This idea is closely linked to Foucault's earlier work on disciplinary power and normalization. From schools and prisons to bureaucracies and legal regimes, modern institutions quietly instill expected forms of behavior, rewarding conformity and punishing deviance. In digital spaces, this logic intensifies. Surveillance, whether carried out by the state, platforms or even peers, encourages a kind of anticipatory compliance. You don't need to be watched all the time, you just need to believe you might be. It's this panoptic effect, what Foucault (Foucault, 2008) called panopticism, that renders overt repression unnecessary.

Pakistan's PECA was enacted in 2016 under the government's broader National Action Plan (NAP), a counterterrorism strategy launched after the 2014 Army Public School massacre in Peshawar that left over 150 people dead, mostly children (Al Jazeera, 2016). Initially, PECA was presented as a vital legal instrument to address emerging cyber threats such as hacking, identity theft, and online harassment (Arab News, 2024b).

However, the 2025 amendments marked a notable departure in both scope and intention (National Assembly, 2025). Where the original legislation focused on defined digital offenses, the revised law introduced ambiguous terms like 'fake news', allowing for broad interpretation and enforcement. It also established new institutions like the Social Media Protections & Regulatory Authority (SMPRA), the National Cybercrime Investigation Agency (NCCIA), and Social Media Protection Tribunals, with expansive authority to monitor, censor, and penalize digital expression (RSIL, 2025; Pakistan Observer, 2025).

Though couched in legal and technical language, these developments may reveal deeply political aims. By framing digital regulation through the lens of national security, public order, and moral responsibility, the state gains wide discretion to shape online discourse and discipline dissent, all while maintaining the facade of lawful governance.

The 2025 amendments to Pakistan's PECA do more than update cybercrime legislation—they mark a shift in how the state governs digital life. What emerges is not just a set of new laws, but a reconfiguration of power that mirrors Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality. The law's passage through formal democratic channels—the National Assembly, the Senate, public debates—gives it a veneer of legitimacy. Yet, beneath this procedural order lies a strategic purpose: the quiet recalibration of how citizens are governed—not by force, but by formation.

In line with Foucault's first element of governmentality, PECA 2025 reveals a complex and multi-layered system of power that extends beyond mere enforcement. The creation of bodies such as the Social Media Protections & Regulatory Authority (SMPRA) and the National Cybercrime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) signals more than lawmaking; it marks the construction of a comprehensive infrastructure designed to manage online behaviour systematically.

Governmentality's second element—the historical shift from direct, overt control to more subtle techniques of guiding conduct—is particularly evident in Pakistan's political trajectory. For over three decades, the country endured military rule characterized by clear, top-down authoritarianism (Arab News, 2024a). Since the democratic transition in 2008, however, and amidst the pressures of globalization, the state has increasingly embraced indirect forms of governance. PECA 2025 embodies this evolution: rather than relying on blunt censorship or overt repression, the government now harnesses institutions, legal frameworks, and carefully calibrated regulatory language to influence citizen behaviour online. In doing so, it shapes discourse and thought without the need for explicit force.

Finally, Foucault adds that power does not operate in a vacuum, but it rather unfolds gradually, shaped by a complex interplay of history, religion, politics, and economics. Pakistan's own trajectory—from its declared independence in 1947, its self-definition as a Muslim state, its emergence as a nuclear power, until its ongoing political and economic challenges—profoundly informs how power is exercised today. The 2025 PECA amendments are deeply embedded

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in this layered context, blending a moralistic rhetoric with national security imperatives and a pressing desire for control amid uncertainty. This convergence of historical legacies and present-day anxieties provides a convenient pretext for intensifying regulation of the digital sphere—framed as a necessity for safeguarding the nation's interests.

The state's exercise of power increasingly extends beyond formal enforcement to actively shaping narratives and behaviours online—moulding how citizens interact, respond, and form opinions. This dynamic is especially visible against the backdrop of ongoing terrorist violence, with Baloch separatist insurgencies in Balochistan and attacks by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Good Authority, 2025). In this context, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) launched a unifying anthem on March 23, 2025, designed to foster resilience, patriotism, and national solidarity. The anthem's emotional resonance and widespread praise (Tribune, 2025) reveal how the state strategically leverages such moments to consolidate soft power, establish boundaries for acceptable public discourse, and shape citizens' expectations of loyalty and engagement.

One might argue that PECA 2025 is essential for national security and the protection of citizens in an increasingly perilous digital landscape, especially given the rise of terrorist propaganda, online extremism, and child pornography. These threats pose real dangers that many countries worldwide grapple with, making a strong case for regulatory frameworks aimed at prevention. Another common counterpoint holds that the state has a fundamental duty to curb misinformation and moral corruption online, particularly as fake news and harmful content have become pervasive issues that undermine social cohesion and democratic processes globally. Both arguments, while understandable and seemingly valid, still fit comfortably within Foucault's concept of governmentality, where the state's exercise of power extends beyond overt coercion to more subtle forms of behavioural regulation.

Further, the government frames PECA 2025 with an economic rationale, positioning the law as a tool to bring social media influencers, journalists, and YouTube content creators into the tax net. Given that Pakistan's tax-to-GDP ratio remains alarmingly low at just 10%—significantly below the regional average—this argument holds considerable economic appeal (OECD, 2025). Alongside this, the government highlights the pressing need for oversight in light of emerging technological challenges like AI-generated deepfakes, presenting such measures as crucial for protecting citizens' dignity and preventing digital deception. Moreover, from a national security perspective, the state defends the recently installed national firewall as an indispensable barrier against digital terrorism. While this firewall has undoubtedly disrupted online activity, it is difficult to dispute that no country in the world would willingly sacrifice its digital sovereignty, especially when confronted with the imperative to safeguard its citizens and institutions (Reuters, 2024).

While concerns around national security, economic regulation, and AI-driven misinformation may appear valid on the surface, they ultimately function as strategic narratives that serve to normalize and justify expanded state control. PECA 2025 presents itself as a necessary measure to protect citizens, widen the tax base, and defend national sovereignty. Yet, these rationales align closely with the deeper workings of governmentality. By framing digital regulation as a form of protection, the state shifts from overt coercion to more subtle forms of management—shaping how individuals think, speak, and behave online through mechanisms of fear, surveillance, and economic categorization. In Foucauldian terms, this is not merely a reaction to external dangers; it is a calculated exercise of power that guides subjectivity and conformity within digital spaces. Rather than existing on the fringes, this control is embedded within the very structures of democratic governance, cloaking domination beneath the guise of legitimate administration.

While PECA 2025 may be presented as a technical update designed to address cybercrime, disinformation, and national security concerns, its true significance lies in how it exercises power. Rather than relying on overt repression, the law operates through more subtle, calculated forms of control that shape not only digital behaviours but also the very mentalities of citizens. This dynamic aligns closely with Foucault's concept of governmentality, where power is diffuse—embedded within institutions, knowledge systems, and social norms—and not simply imposed from above but internalized by individuals themselves. PECA 2025 exemplifies how contemporary governance increasingly seeks to produce compliant digital subjects—not by silencing them outright, but by fostering an environment where self-regulation, adaptation, and conformity become the norm. It is through this normalization that the law derives its power, less through explicit command and more through conditioning consent. Ultimately,

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PECA is not just a legal instrument but a political technology, reflecting how the Pakistani state governs through narratives, norms, and networks, embodying governmentality in its most modern, digital form—in a distinctly Foucauldian sense.

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