



## **Reporting on Pakistani Parliament Speech**

**2023-038-FB-MR**

### **Summary**

The Oversight Board has upheld Meta’s decision to leave up a post shared by a news outlet in Pakistan that includes a video of a politician giving a speech to the country’s parliament. The post does not violate the Violence and Incitement Community Standard because it falls under the exception for “awareness raising.” Additionally, the politician’s references to public officials being sacrificed or “hanged” are figurative (non-literal) when considering the whole speech, which seeks to draw attention to Pakistan’s political crisis and lack of accountability among the establishment. In a period of turmoil, ahead of national elections, the Board considers safeguarding such speech as fundamental.

### **About the Case**

In May 2023, an independent news outlet in Pakistan posted a video on its Facebook page of a Pakistani politician giving a speech in Urdu to the country’s parliament. The speech references what he describes as an ancient Egyptian “tradition” in which people were sacrificed to control flooding of the Nile River. The politician uses this reference to express what he thinks should happen in present-day Pakistan, also recalling a previous speech in which he said the country could not heal itself until public officials, including the military, were “hanged.” The politician implicates himself and his colleagues among the officials that need to be sacrificed, saying they are all responsible for what is happening. His speech alludes to the ongoing political crisis, with criticism aimed at the government and military establishment. The post was shared about 20,000 times and had 40,000 reactions.

The local news outlet posted the video ahead of national elections that were due to take place in 2023, but were delayed until February 2024. A time of political turmoil, which saw escalating confrontation between former Prime Minister Imran Khan and the military establishment, the country experienced political protests and growing polarization. There were crackdowns on political opponents and in Balochistan, the province where this politician’s party is based, state repression was particularly pronounced.



Over a three-month period in 2023, Meta’s automated systems identified the post as potentially violating 45 times. Two human reviewers then came to different decisions on the post, one finding it to be non-violating, the other finding that it broke the rules of the Violence and Incitement policy. As the account that shared the content was part of Meta’s cross-check program, the post was marked for an additional level of review. Ultimately, Meta’s policy and subject matter experts found the post to be non-violating. Meta referred the case to the Board because it represents tensions in its values of voice and safety when applied to political speech.

## **Key Findings**

The Board finds the post does not violate the Violence and Incitement Community Standard because it was shared by a media outlet seeking to inform others and therefore falls under the exception for “awareness raising.” Delivered in the run-up to elections before parliament, the politician’s speech undoubtedly covered matters of public interest, including events in the political and public domain. Shared during a period of national turmoil by a local news outlet, the speech demanded “particularly high” protection. Furthermore, the post’s caption did not endorse or support the politician’s speech, rather it pointed to the strong reaction the speech generated in parliament.

At the time the post was shared in May 2023, the “awareness raising” exception was only included in Meta’s internal guidelines to reviewers, not publicly, but it has since been included in the Community Standards in line with one of the Board’s previous recommendations.

The Board also emphasizes the importance of assessing context when applying the Violence and Incitement policy to speech by politicians that could incite violence. In this case, there was no credible threat that could lead to death from the post, which was a news report of a politician using figurative speech to comment on the political crisis in Pakistan. The comparison between “hanging” officials and the ancient Egyptian myth of sacrifice is clearly metaphorical and political exaggeration, rather than an actual threat. Experts consulted by the Board confirmed that Pakistani politicians commonly use highly charged and provocative language to draw attention to issues they consider important. The politician names no specific targets in his speech; instead, he refers generally to public officials, including himself. When considered in full, his speech urgently calls for action on accountability among public



officials while drawing attention to broader issues, including human rights violations against the people of Balochistan.

Therefore, the Board considers that safeguarding such speech, in the run-up to elections, is fundamental.

### **The Oversight Board’s Decision**

The Oversight Board upholds Meta’s decision to leave up the content.

The Board makes no new recommendations but reiterates recommendation no. 1 from the [Brazilian General’s Speech](#) decision to ensure that speech with high public interest value in the run-up to elections can be preserved on Meta’s platforms. Specifically, the Board urges Meta to speed up its implementation of a framework “for evaluating the company’s election efforts, including creating and sharing metrics.” This is particularly important given the large number of elections in 2024, including in Global Majority countries.

\*Case summaries provide an overview of cases and do not have precedential value.

## **Full Case Decision**

### **1. Decision Summary**

The Oversight Board upholds Meta’s decision to leave up a post shared by a news outlet that includes a video of a politician giving a speech to Pakistan’s parliament, ahead of national elections in the country. The post contains a caption noting the intense reaction the speech evoked in parliament. The speech references what the politician describes as an ancient Egyptian “tradition” of sacrificing people to control the flooding of the River Nile. The politician uses this reference to express what he thinks should happen in present-day Pakistan and as a reminder of when he previously said the country could not heal itself until public officials were “hanged.” His speech is made in the context of significant political turmoil in Pakistan, in the lead-up to elections, and is critical of the government and military establishment.

The Board finds the post did not violate the Violence and Incitement policy because it was shared by a media outlet seeking to inform others and therefore falls under the exception



for “awareness raising.” The politician’s speech shared by the news outlet covered matters of public interest and was delivered before parliament in the run-up to elections, during a period of national turmoil. The Board also finds that the post’s caption did not endorse or support the politician’s speech, rather it pointed to the strong reaction the speech generated in parliament. In a period of turmoil, ahead of national elections, the Board considers safeguarding such speech as fundamental.

Additionally, given the context and considering the politician’s speech in full, the Board considers that the relevant statement is figurative, rather than literal. The comparison between “hanging” officials and the ancient Egyptian myth of sacrifice is clearly metaphorical and political exaggeration, rather than an actual threat that could lead to death. The politician names no specific targets in his speech and he includes himself among those to sacrifice. The Board concludes that his speech should be understood as an urgent call for action on accountability among public officials while drawing attention to broader social and political issues in Pakistan.

## **2. Case Description and Background**

On May 16, 2023, a small private Urdu-language, local news outlet in Pakistan posted a video on its Facebook page of a Pakistani politician giving a speech to the country’s parliament a day earlier. The politician’s speech, in Urdu, references what he describes as an ancient Egyptian “tradition” in which people were sacrificed to control flooding of the Nile River. The politician references the “tradition” as part of his opinion on what should happen in present-day Pakistan and says that, in a previous speech, he had stated that Pakistan will not heal itself until different types of public officials, including the military, are “hanged.”

The politician then alludes to the ongoing political crisis in Pakistan, referring to issues affecting the country ahead of parliamentary elections, including missing persons in Balochistan and references that are critical of government and the military establishment. He continues by saying that to end the “flood,” they need to make “sacrifices.” The politician clearly implicates himself and other colleagues in those public officials who need to be “hanged” as a form of sacrifice, saying they are all responsible for what is happening.



The post includes a caption and text overlaying the video, also in Urdu, that repeat the politician’s statement about hanging public officials. The caption also mentions the strong reaction the speech generated in parliament.

The content has been shared about 20,000 times, has about 3,000 comments and about 40,000 reactions, the majority of which are “likes.” Between June and September 2023, Meta’s automated systems identified the content in this case as potentially violating the Community Standards 45 times, creating reports that sent the content for review. Two of these reports were reviewed by at-scale human reviewers. The first review found the content to be non-violating while the second determined it violated the Violence and Incitement policy. Because the account that posted the content was part of the cross-check program, the content was marked for secondary review and remained on the platform pending the completion of that process. The content was ultimately escalated to policy and subject matter experts who determined it did not violate the Violence and Incitement policy. The content was left on the platform. Meta referred the case to the Board because it represents tension in its values of voice and safety when applied to political speech.

The speech in this case was made in the context of significant political turmoil in Pakistan, a few days after the arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan. In April 2022, Mr. Khan was ousted in a no-confidence vote by Pakistan’s political opposition amid an alleged escalating confrontation between Mr. Khan and the military establishment. Seeking to regain power, Mr. Khan and his party sought to bring forward parliamentary elections, as the National Assembly mandate was originally scheduled to conclude in August 2023.

On May 9, 2023, Imran Khan was arrested on corruption charges, for which he was later convicted and sentenced to several years in prison – a move some saw as an attempt to block him from participating in the parliamentary elections. In August 2023, the president dissolved the National Assembly, setting the stage for upcoming general elections, constitutionally required to be held 90 days after dissolution, in November. An interim caretaker government took over, and in November, Pakistan’s election oversight body postponed elections to February 8, 2024, citing the need for redrawn constituency maps. This fueled political uncertainty surrounding the elections and extended the interim governments appointed since Mr. Khan’s ousting. In December 2023, Meta also publicly



reported that the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority [requested restricted access to a post](#) criticizing the military establishment.

Mr. Khan's arrest galvanized massive political protests throughout the country and unprecedented attacks upon military buildings and public and private property, events that created the impetus for the politician's speech. The [UN reported](#) that at least eight people died, around 1,000 people were arrested and hundreds were injured during clashes with security forces. The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, [called for an end to violence](#). Independent media has reported that [thousands](#) of the former prime minister's supporters, party workers and members of his political party have been [arrested](#) since May 2023. Additionally, Pakistan's telecommunications authorities reportedly shut off access to mobile internet and social media [for days](#) during the violent protests, with [journalists attacked and detained](#) by police as well as being attacked by protesters.

The politician depicted in the video is the leader of a small, yet influential, political party in Balochistan (Pakistan's largest province), which mostly focuses on addressing issues relevant to the region and has long decried the abuse of power deployed by the Pakistani state against the Baloch people. He served as a member of parliament until August 2023 and in the ruling coalitions of the last two governments. According to experts consulted by the Board, he has a reputation as a moderate politician and has previously condemned violence against civilians. He is very critical of the military establishment although his party has been part of government coalitions that have aligned with the establishment.

While the politician's speech followed the immediate turmoil created by Khan's arrest, the politician refers to broader social and political issues in Pakistan and Balochistan. Experts consulted by the Board stated that Pakistan is experiencing severe levels of political polarization, fueled by the longstanding confrontation between Mr. Khan, the government and the military establishment. The military establishment, initially supportive of Mr. Khan, holds significant political influence in Pakistan and is not accustomed to facing public criticism. However, following a harsh crackdown on Mr. Khan and his supporters, anti-military sentiment has been escalating.

Experts further noted that two days before the speech, attacks on security forces also occurred in Balochistan, which could also have prompted the speech. Balochistan has



historically had a vibrant political and civil society movement that advocated for more [political autonomy and socioeconomic rights](#) – however, increasingly harsh state repression in Balochistan in an effort to maintain authority [has led to the birth](#) of a more radical armed secessionist movement.

Balochistan has suffered from political violence for decades, which has been exacerbated by military repression and [massive violations of human rights](#) such as [forced disappearances and extrajudicial killings](#), common tactics deployed by security forces and state-sponsored private militias to weaken the separatist movement. Experts noted that Pakistan’s military forces have a large presence in Balochistan due to active separatist movements and frequent terrorist attacks. They also emphasized the military had established violent militias, allegedly intended to target members of the Baloch population suspected to be connected to the separatist movement. Some of these militias later turned against the military, further fueling separatist sentiment and violence.

Pakistan’s political crisis has been exacerbated by economic issues, the ongoing consequences of devastating floods in 2022 and an increase in [terrorist acts in Balochistan](#) and [elsewhere](#), which have been met with punitive counterterrorism measures, including forced disappearances and death squads in Balochistan. Terrorist attacks have been [repeatedly condemned by the UN](#) while [other human rights experts](#) have reiterated their concerns about the adoption of abusive counterterrorism measures.

In this context, the politician uses several inflammatory and illustrative terms in the speech that are relevant to Pakistan’s political history and current political landscape. These include references that are critical of government and military policies, as well as the lack of accountability among the establishment’s state officials. Simultaneously, the speech addresses violence against Baloch communities and their struggles for accessing justice.

Linguistic and cultural experts consulted by the Board noted that Pakistani political culture involves the use of highly charged provocative language to bring attention to issues deemed important. They stated that the “tradition” mentioned in the politician’s speech refers to a myth regarding sacrificial practices in ancient Egypt to control flooding of the Nile. In this context, the politician refers to the “sacrifice” of those who are responsible for the political crisis. Experts noted that the need to stop the “flood” could





symbolize putting an end to the raft of political problems faced by the country, both nationally and in Balochistan, or addressing the unrest caused by societal inequalities.

Additionally, the politician refers to “Frankenstein” and other “monsters” in his speech. Experts noted these references could be to describe how the Pakistani state has created violent actors such as militant groups that were meant to serve the country’s interests but ended up turning against them, endangering the state – an issue particularly affecting Balochistan.

Pakistan held parliamentary elections on February 8, 2024. The politician who delivered the speech in this case was successfully re-elected, securing a seat in the National Assembly. At the time of the speech, political tensions in Pakistan were notably heightened following the ousting and arrest of former Prime Minister Khan. Currently serving several years in prison, Mr. Khan was barred, along with his party, from running in the parliamentary elections. His party candidates were forced to run as independents. According to experts consulted by the Board, there are observers who allege that the establishment has opposed Mr. Khan’s political party returning to power. Other observers also consider that, although grounded in law, the timing of the charges brought against him may be [politically motivated](#).

Pakistan has remained in a state of turmoil. In response to the inconclusive national elections that did not return a clear majority winner, two of the leading opposition parties to Mr. Khan reached a formal agreement to form a coalition government. The situation has been further complicated by allegations of vote rigging.

In a broader human rights context, UN human rights experts and [civil rights organizations](#) have highlighted that Imran [Khan’s previous government, the current regime](#) and the military establishment have all curtailed media freedoms in recent years. Media outlets have faced interference, withdrawal of government advertising, bans on television presenters and on broadcasting content. The license of one of the country’s prominent private news channels was also suspended. Likewise, online activists, dissidents and journalists are often subjected to threats and harassment by the government and their supporters, including some cases of violence and enforced disappearances for criticizing the military establishment and the government. Women’s rights movements, seeking to address gender equality issues, faced permit denials and court petitions attempting to





ban their marches, citing objections from public and religious organizations, ostensibly creating law and order risks. These organizations have also [reported](#) constraints on internet freedoms imposed by the Pakistani government. Authorities routinely use internet shutdowns, platform blocking and harsh convictions to suppress critical online speech. Independent media outlets have also [documented](#) how the Pakistani [government makes requests](#) for social-media platforms to remove content, especially when that content questions human rights violations and the military establishment’s involvement in politics. Meta informed the Board that it restricted local access to thousands of pieces of content reported by Pakistan for allegedly violating local laws. This information was also reported in the company’s [Transparency Center](#).

### **3. Oversight Board Authority and Scope**

The Board has authority to review decisions that Meta submits for review (Charter Article 2, Section 1; Bylaws Article 2, Section 2.1.1).

The Board may uphold or overturn Meta’s decision (Charter Article 3, Section 5) and this decision is binding on the company (Charter Article 4). Meta must also assess the feasibility of applying its decision in respect to identical content with parallel context (Charter Article 4). The Board’s decisions may include non-binding recommendations that Meta must respond to (Charter Article 3, Section 4; Article 4). When Meta commits to act on recommendations, the Board monitors their implementation.

### **4. Sources of Authority and Guidance**

The following standards and precedents informed the Board’s analysis in this case:

#### *1. Oversight Board Decisions*

- [Mention of the Taliban in News Reporting](#)
- [Russian Poem](#)
- [Iran Protest Slogan](#)
- [Brazilian General’s Speech](#)
- [Cambodian Prime Minister](#)
- [Political Dispute Ahead of Turkish Elections](#)
- [Call for Women’s Protest in Cuba](#)



- [Communal Violence in Indian State of Odisha](#)
- [Iranian Woman Confronted on Street](#)

## *II. Meta's Content Policies*

The Board's analysis was informed by Meta's commitment to voice, which the company describes as "paramount," and its value of safety.

Meta updated its Violence and Incitement Community Standard several times since the content was first posted in May 2023. The Board analyzed the content on the basis of the most recent version of the Violence and Incitement Community Standard, which came into effect on December 6, 2023.

The [policy rationale](#) of the Violence and Incitement Community Standard states that it aims "to prevent potential offline violence that may be related to content" appearing on Meta's platforms, and that while Meta "understand[s] that people commonly express disdain or disagreement by threatening or calling for violence in non-serious and casual ways, [the company] remove[s] language that incites or facilitates violence and credible threats to public or personal safety." The policy rationale explains that "context matters, so [Meta] consider[s] various factors such as condemnation or awareness raising of violent threats, [...] or the public visibility and vulnerability of the target of the threats." Meta "remove[s] content, disable[s] accounts, and also work[s] with law enforcement when [the company] believe[s] there is a genuine risk of physical harm or direct threats to public safety."

The policy specifically prohibits, "Threats of violence that could lead to death (or other forms of high-severity violence)." The policy specifies that "threats of violence are statements or visuals representing an intention, aspiration, or call for violence against a target, and threats can be expressed in various types of statements such as statements of intent, calls for action, advocacy, aspirational statements and conditional statements." Following the latest policy updates on December 6, 2023, the public-facing language of the Community Standard now also clarifies that Meta "does not prohibit threats when shared in awareness-raising or condemning context," in line with the Board's recommendation in the [Russian Poem](#) case.



### *III. Meta's Human Rights Responsibilities*

The [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) (UNGPs), endorsed by the UN Human Rights Council in 2011, establish a voluntary framework for the human rights responsibilities of private businesses. Meta's [Corporate Human Rights Policy](#), announced in 2021, reaffirmed the company's commitment to respecting human rights in accordance with the UNGPs.

The following international standards were relevant to the Board's analysis of Meta's human rights responsibilities in this case:

- The right to freedom of expression: Article 19, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ([ICCPR](#)), [General Comment No. 34](#), Human Rights Committee, 2011; UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, reports: [A/HRC/38/35](#) (2018) and [A/HRC/50/29](#) (2022). [Joint Declaration on Media Freedom and Democracy](#), UN and regional mandates on freedom of expression (2023); [Joint Declaration on politicians and public officials and freedom of expression](#), UN and regional mandates on freedom of expression (2021).
- The right to life: Article 6, ICCPR.
- The right to liberty and security of person: Article 9, ICCPR, [General Comment No. 35](#), Human Rights Committee, 2014.

## **5. User Submissions**

Following Meta's referral and the Board's decision to accept the case, the user was sent a message notifying them of the Board's review and providing them with an opportunity to submit a statement to the Board. The user did not submit a statement.

## **6. Meta's Submissions**

When Meta reviewed the content, the company found it did not violate the Violence and Incitement Community Standard (based on the version of the policy that was in effect at the time of its review) because it was posted by a news outlet to raise awareness of a politician's speech.



Meta stated that the company removes “statements advocating for high-severity violence,” such as calling for individuals to be hanged publicly but it allows the content when shared in an awareness raising context. The company said that in this case, the content was shared by a media outlet in the context of raising awareness and thus fell under the exception of the Community Standard. Even when a statement constitutes a credible threat, Meta allows this content if it seeks to inform others. Referring to its previous internal definition, Meta explained that this exception “applies specifically to content that clearly seeks to inform and educate others about a specific topic or issue (...). This might include academic and media reports.” This internal definition has been updated to reflect new definitions for “awareness raising” (as mentioned in Section 8.1 below).

The company noted that when viewing the post “holistically,” it determined that the content was posted by the news agency to “raise awareness about statements made by a politician on issues of public importance.” Meta found that the post did more than reshare the specific portion of the politician’s speech that called for high-severity violence but shared a ten-minute video of the speech, placing the statements in greater context. Meta also considered that the news agency’s caption to the post didn’t endorse or support any particular message, but instead editorialized the politician’s comments, suggesting that the speech was powerful and impactful. The company additionally noted that the news outlet is not affiliated with the politician in the video or the government, and which does not have a history of posting content that incites violence.

Meta further explained that, even if the content contained a credible threat and did not fall under the policy allowance for “raising awareness,” it would have allowed the content because it was newsworthy. Meta states that “in some cases, [the company] allow[s] content – which would otherwise go against [its] standards – if it’s newsworthy and in the public interest.”

Meta argued that the public interest value was high because the speech was delivered in a public forum and called out relevant issues. The content was also broadcast by reputable news organizations and had been originally broadcast publicly. Meta considered that the risk of harm was low because while the speech on the surface called for violent actions, these “appeared to be rhetorical” in light of the broader political context, and “there was



no indication that the post was likely to result in violence or harm” since the post has remained on the platform “without any known incidents.”

The company further noted that, although the raising awareness exception was applicable in this case, the speech itself did not contain an actual threat. The company stated that the politician’s statement in the video did not actually “advocate for high severity violence” as it did not contain a “credible threat.” Rather, it should be interpreted as a “rhetorical statement . . . intended to make a political point.” Meta explained that it can be difficult to distinguish between credible and non-credible threats when reviewing content at-scale. In this case, the assessment that the content did not include a credible threat but was instead “political rhetoric” was made after escalation, meaning it was made by Meta’s internal expert teams. These teams consider context in more detail to distinguish between “advocating for violence and heated rhetoric.”

The threat was “rhetorical” because the politician made a comparison between an ancient myth of sacrifice in Egypt and advocating for the hanging of unnamed politicians, generals, bureaucrats and judges. According to Meta, this “suggests political hyperbole rather than an actual threat.” The politician’s speech also highlighted “broader issues of corruption, nepotism, alleged discrimination against the Baloch people” and concerns about “lack of accountability for members of the military establishment in Pakistan’s history.” According to Meta, his comments advocating high-severity violence “must be viewed with this larger purpose in mind.”

The Board asked Meta 18 questions in writing. Questions related to Meta’s automated and human enforcement; Meta’s escalation-only process; latest updates of the Violence and Incitement policy and the internal instructions for content moderators; processes for government requests for content to be reviewed; measures taken by Meta in light of the approaching election in 2024; and measures to protect politicians and candidates as well as channels of communications that Meta has established with the Pakistani government. Meta answered all the questions that the Board asked. Meta informed the Board that it was unable to provide complete information on requests it had received from the government of Pakistan to take down content over the past year because this would require data validation, which could not be completed in time.

## **7. Public Comments**



The Oversight Board received three public comments that met the terms for submission. One was submitted from the United States and Canada, one from Asia Pacific and Oceania, and one from Central and South Asia. To read the public comments submitted with consent to publish, click [here](#).

The submissions covered the following themes: the role of social media and digital platforms, and the increase in news reporting by entities other than journalists; the potential risks associated with permitting violent political speech on social media in Pakistan; the political and human rights situation in the country; freedom of expression, media freedom and highlighting specific laws that pose serious threats to press freedom.

## **8. Oversight Board Analysis**

The Board examined Meta’s decision to leave up the content under the company’s content policies, human rights responsibilities and values.

The Board selected this case because it offered the opportunity to explore Meta’s Violence and Incitement policy as well as the related enforcement process in the context of political speech. It raises relevant questions around how Meta should treat speech from politicians and any related news coverage of that speech on its platforms, particularly ahead of elections. This case provides an opportunity to directly explore issues around the protection of journalism and the importance of news outlets reporting on issues, events or subjects of public interest.

Additionally, the case provides the Board with the opportunity to discuss Meta’s internal procedures for when threatening speech should be construed figuratively rather than literally. The case primarily falls into the Board’s Elections and Civic Space strategic priority.

### **8.1 Compliance with Meta’s Content Policies**

The Board finds the content in this case does not violate the Violence and Incitement Community Standard because, regardless of whether the underlying content would meet



the threshold for incitement, it was shared by a media outlet seeking to inform others, and thus falls under the exception for raising awareness.

At the time the content was posted, Meta’s “awareness raising” exception was contained only in its internal guidelines to reviewers, not the public-facing Community Standard – it allowed “violating content if it is shared in a condemning or awareness raising context.” It defined awareness raising context as “content that clearly seeks to inform and educate others about a specific topic or issue,” which might include media reports. Following updates to the public-facing Community Standard on December 6, 2023, in line with the Board’s recommendation in the [Russian Poem case](#), the policy now explicitly reflects this exception: “[Meta] do[es] not prohibit threats when shared in awareness-raising or condemning context.”

Meta further updated its internal standards to define awareness raising in more detail, as “sharing, discussing or reporting new information ... for the purpose of improving the understanding of an issue or knowledge of a subject that has public interest value. Awareness raising ... should not aim to incite violence or spread hate or misinformation. This includes, but is not limited to, citizen journalism and sharing of news reports by regular users.” Meta explained that “news reporting” falls in the broader category of content that is shared to raise awareness.

In this case, there were several clear indicators that the content fell within the exception for raising awareness. It was posted by a news outlet and depicted a politician’s speech referring to the social and political situation in Pakistan, ahead of elections. The speech was undoubtedly referring to matters of public interest, concerning events and figures in the public and political domain. The video shows the politician’s call to “hang” officials in the context of his wider speech, placing the statements in a broader context and highlighting other issues of public interest. The post does not endorse or support the politician’s message and the caption, noting that the speech generated a strong reaction, makes it clear the content is shared to report on the politician’s speech to raise awareness.

Although the content in this case benefits from the awareness-raising exception, the Board further notes that taking into account the context, it does not contain a “credible threat” of “violence that could lead to death” that would violate the Violence and





Incitement Community Standard. The Board highlights that certain elements may aid in distinguishing whether a speech should be interpreted as figurative or non-literal, as opposed to constituting credible threats. This distinction holds particular significance when statements are of a political nature, especially in the lead-up to elections.

The Board acknowledges the importance of removing speech by politicians that is likely to incite violence if this speech entails specific and credible threats and targets (see, for example, the [Cambodian Prime Minister case](#)), but reiterates the importance of contextual assessments when applying the policy. In the absence of credible threats, speech using threatening language figuratively, or not literally, should not constitute a violation of the Violence and Incitement policy (see [Russian Poem](#), [Iran Protest Slogan](#), [Iranian Woman Confronted on Street](#) decisions).

In this case, the content is a news report depicting a politician addressing parliament to make points on the social and political situation in Pakistan. Based on the context and on the linguistic and cultural experts consulted, the Board considers that the politician is using figurative speech rather than a literal, credible threat of violence. The politician uses illustrative speech and historical references to criticize the political crisis in Pakistan. The Board agrees with Meta that the metaphorical comparison between killing officials and the ancient myth of sacrificing something to control flooding of the Nile is an expression of political exaggeration rather than an actual threat. Experts consulted by the Board explained that highly charged and provocative language is commonly used by Pakistani politicians to draw attention to issues they consider important, and that they tend to be purposefully provocative and hyperbolic in their speeches before parliament. The Board considers that safeguarding such speech, when figurative (non-literal), especially in the lead-up to elections, is fundamental. Additionally, the politician's statement addresses broader issues such as corruption, perceived discrimination and human rights violations against the Baloch people, who have struggled to access justice, and the lack of accountability among state officials and the military establishment in the country's history. Unlike in the Cambodian Prime Minister decision, the politician in this case does not name specific targets (he refers only to general categories of public officials), includes himself in those targeted categories and does not have a history of inciting violence. The relevant context is discussed in section 8.2 below.



In context, the statements should therefore be understood as a call to action, expression of alarm and assignment of blame rather than as threats against individual people. Similar to the content in the Iran Protest Slogan and Russian Poem cases, they are best understood as figurative expressions used to convey a political message rather than a credible threat.

The Board acknowledges that while the content in this case clearly does not violate the policy, differentiating between statements using threatening language figuratively, or not literally, and credible threats, requires context and can be difficult at scale. As the Board has stated previously, it is therefore important that Meta provides precise guidance to reviewers on which factors to consider when moderating potentially figurative speech (see recommendation no. 1 in the Iran Protest Slogan case). Given the potential challenges for reviewers at-scale in differentiating figurative speech from credible threats, the awareness raising exception provides additional protection for ensuring that figurative speech shared by news outlets for the purposes of reporting and raising awareness is not removed from the platform.

## **8.2 Compliance with Meta’s Human Rights Responsibilities**

The Board finds that leaving the content on the platform was consistent with Meta’s human rights responsibilities.

### *Freedom of Expression (Article 19 ICCPR)*

Article 19 of the ICCPR provides for broad protection of expression, including “freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other [means].” This protection is “particularly high” for “public debate in a democratic society concerning figures in the public and political domain,” ([General Comment 34](#), paras. 34 and 38). Political speech and speech on other matters of public interest enjoys the “highest possible level of protection ... including through the media and digital communication platforms, especially in the context of elections,” ([Joint Declaration](#), 2021).

The role of the media in reporting information across the digital ecosystem is critical (see [Political Dispute Ahead of Turkish Elections decision](#)). International human rights law places particular value on the role of journalism and media in providing information that



is of interest to the public (see [Mention of the Taliban in News Reporting decision](#)). The Human Rights Committee has stressed that a “free, uncensored and unhindered press or other media is essential” with press or other media being able to “comment on public issues without censorship or restraint and to inform public opinion,” ([General Comment 34](#), para. 13).

Social media platforms like Facebook have become a vehicle for distributing reporting around the world, and Meta has recognized its responsibilities to journalists in its corporate human rights policy. Digital platforms are important distribution and audience-engagement channels for many media outlets. As “digital gatekeepers,” social media platforms have a “profound impact” on public access to information, ([A/HRC/50/29](#), para. 90).

When restrictions on expression are imposed by a state, they must meet the requirements of legality, legitimate aim, and necessity and proportionality (Article 19, para. 3, ICCPR). The Board uses this framework to interpret Meta’s voluntary human rights commitments, both in relation to the individual content decision under review and what this says about Meta’s broader approach to content governance. As the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression has stated, although “companies do not have the obligations of Governments, their impact is of a sort that requires them to assess the same kind of questions about protecting their users’ right to freedom of expression,” ([A/74/486](#), para. 41).

#### *1. Legality (Clarity and Accessibility of the Rules)*

The principle of legality requires any restriction on freedom of expression to be pursuant to an established rule, which is accessible and clear to users. The rule must be “formulated with sufficient precision to enable an individual to regulate his or her conduct accordingly and it must be accessible to the public,” ([General Comment No. 34](#), at para 25). Additionally, the rules restricting expression “may not confer unfettered discretion for the restriction of freedom of expression on those charged with [their] execution” and should “provide sufficient guidance to those charged with their execution to enable them to ascertain what sorts of expression are properly restricted and what sorts are not,” ([General Comment No. 34](#), at para 25; [A/HRC/38/35 \(undocs.org\)](#), at para 46). Lack of clarity or precision can lead to inconsistent and arbitrary enforcement of the



rules. Applied to Meta, users should be able to predict the consequences of posting content on Facebook and Instagram, and content reviewers should have clear guidance on their enforcement.

The Board notes that the “awareness raising” exception described above was still not included in the public-facing language of the policy at the time this content was posted. In other words, at that time, users were still unaware that otherwise violating content was permitted if it was shared in a condemning or awareness raising context, which may have prevented users from initiating or engaging in public interest discussions on Meta’s platforms (see [Communal Violence in Indian State of Odisha](#) decision).

Following its latest policy update and considering recommendations from the Board in previous cases, Meta now explicitly includes the awareness-raising exception in the Community Standard. The policy states that Meta does not prohibit threats when shared in awareness-raising or condemning context, thereby ensuring compliance with the legality requirement.

The Board finds that while the policy rationale of the Violence and Incitement Community Standard suggests that “context” may be considered when evaluating a “credible threat,” the policy does not specify how figurative (or not literal) statements are to be distinguished from credible threats. The Board reiterates its findings from the Iran Protest Slogan and Iranian Woman Confronted on Street cases that Meta should include an explanation of how it moderates figurative (non-literal) threats.

## *II. Legitimate Aim*

Restrictions on freedom of expression must pursue a legitimate aim listed under article 19, para. 3 of the ICCPR, which include the “rights of others.” In seeking to “prevent potential offline violence” by removing content that poses “a genuine risk of physical harm or direct threats to public safety,” the Violence and Incitement Community Standard serves the legitimate aims of protecting the right to life (Article 6, ICCPR) and the right to security of person (Article 9 ICCPR, [General Comment No. 35](#), para. 9.)



### *III. Necessity and Proportionality*

Any restrictions on freedom of expression “must be appropriate to achieve their protective function; they must be the least intrusive instrument amongst those which might achieve their protective function; they must be proportionate to the interest to be protected,” ([General Comment 34](#), para. 34). Social media companies should consider a range of possible responses to problematic content beyond deletion to ensure restrictions are narrowly tailored ([A/74/486](#), para. 51).

Removal of the content from the platform in this case would not satisfy the principles of necessity and proportionality as it was shared by a media outlet to raise awareness, and contains figurative political speech that does not constitute incitement to violence, instead of a literal, credible threat.

The Board further notes that the expression at issue here deserves “particularly high” protection for its political nature ([General Comment 34](#), para. 34) and because it was delivered before parliament in a debate focused on national political issues. This took place during a period of significant social and political turmoil leading up to Pakistan’s elections, which were delayed in 2023 and then held on February 8, 2024. Content shared by a media outlet to raise awareness on political issues in a pre-election context should not be restricted.

The role of media reporting in this context becomes increasingly crucial and enjoys particular value and protection (see [Mention of the Taliban in News Reporting](#) decision and [General Comment 34](#), para. 13). Digital media outlets play a key role in distributing information and statements. The removal of this content by Meta would be a disproportionate restriction on the contribution of the press to discussion of matters of public interest.

The Board further notes that removal would not be a proportionate restriction given that the speech itself should have been interpreted in a figurative, non-literal manner and did not constitute actual incitement to violence. The six factors described in the [Rabat Plan of Action](#) (looking at the context, speaker, intent, content of the speech, extent of the speech and likelihood of imminent harm) provide valuable guidance in this assessment.



Although the Rabat factors were developed for advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement, and not for incitement generally, they offer a useful framework in assessing whether or not the content incites others to violence (see, for example, [Iran Protest Slogan](#) and [Call for Women's Protest in Cuba](#)).

The content was posted in the context of the upcoming elections and amid ongoing political turmoil. The ousting and arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan heightened existing tensions and polarization, prompting massive protests throughout the country, arrests, unprecedented attacks upon army buildings and violent repression by the police – especially directed at protesting civilians, Khan's supporters and opposition figures. Experts consulted by the Board noted the Pakistani government has a history of targeting those who speak critically of the government, military establishment and judiciary with arrest and legal action.

Although the politician depicted in the post is a public figure, whose speech potentially carries a higher risk of harm due to their position of authority, he had no history of inciting violence. The content and form of the statement suggest that it was not meant literally and is figurative in nature, as the politician does not name specific targets (he refers only to categories of public officials) and includes himself in those targeted categories. Experts also noted that highly charged and provocative language is commonly used by Pakistani politicians. Furthermore, the politician's whole speech, which was often illustrative in nature, also discussed broader issues of public interest ahead of the parliamentary elections in Pakistan, including human rights violations against the Baloch people. Thus, the contextual factors and the substance of the speech suggest that the politician's intention was to urgently call for action, calling for public officials not to be hanged but to be held accountable. While the content had a wide reach, it did not stand out compared to other events at the time. Additionally, as the politician did not name specific targets but generally referred to the governing regime, of which he was a member, the speech was not likely to trigger imminent harm. The intent of the speaker, despite his identity, the content of the speech and its reach, as well as the likelihood of imminent harm, all justified leaving the content on the platform.

The Board believes that in complex political contexts such as those described in this case, evaluating the significance and connection of the politician's speech to the broader electoral landscape is crucial. The timing of the speech, considering the political



circumstances at that moment, is fundamental, as described earlier (see section 2). Any speech of this nature, viewed in the context of upcoming elections, should be retained on the platform.

In order to ensure that speech with a high public interest value, such as the content in this case, is preserved on the platform, the Board reiterates recommendation no.1 from the [Brazilian General's Speech](#) case, which was accepted by Meta. In that case, the Board recommended that Meta develop a framework for evaluating the company's election efforts. This includes creating and sharing metrics for successful election efforts, particularly with a view to Meta's enforcement of its content policies, allowing the company not only to identify and reverse errors, but also to keep track of how effective its measures are in the context of elections. Implementing this recommendation requires publishing country-specific reports.

In its response to this recommendation, Meta informed the Board that it has a variety of metrics to evaluate the success of its elections efforts and increase its transparency about their impact but will seek to consolidate these into a specific set of election metrics that will allow the company to improve how it evaluates its efforts in the lead-up to, during, and after elections. Meta [reported](#) that it is currently conducting a pilot evaluation using different metrics across multiple elections in 2024 and informed the Board of its plan to publicly share a description of these metrics in early 2025. The Board urges Meta to undertake this process sooner, if possible, given the large number of countries holding elections this year, including in Global Majority countries.

## **9. Oversight Board Decision**

The Oversight Board upholds Meta's decision to leave up the content.

## **10. Recommendations**

The Oversight Board decided not to issue new recommendations in this decision, given the relevance of a previous recommendation issued in the [Brazilian General's Speech](#) case, which was accepted by Meta. In order to ensure that speech with a high public interest value such as the content in this case is preserved on the platform, the Board reiterates the following recommendation:





- Meta should develop a framework for evaluating the company’s election efforts. This includes creating and sharing metrics for successful election efforts, particularly with a view to Meta’s enforcement of its content policies. Implementing this recommendation requires publishing country-specific reports ([Brazilian General's Speech](#), recommendation no.1).

**\*Procedural Note:**

The Oversight Board’s decisions are prepared by panels of five Members and approved by a majority of the Board. Board decisions do not necessarily represent the personal views of all Members.

For this case decision, independent research was commissioned on behalf of the Board. The Board was assisted by an independent research institute headquartered at the University of Gothenburg, which draws on a team of over 50 social scientists on six continents, as well as more than 3,200 country experts from around the world. The Board was also assisted by Duco Advisors, an advisory firm focusing on the intersection of geopolitics, trust and safety, and technology. Memetica, an organization that engages in open-source research on social media trends, also provided analysis. Linguistic expertise was provided by Lionbridge Technologies, LLC, whose specialists are fluent in more than 350 languages and work from 5,000 cities across the world.