



## The Bat, the Lion, and the Arrow: Political Identity Through Pakistan's Ballot Symbol Designs (1970 to 2024)

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### ABSTRACT

In electoral systems serving a low-literacy electorate, the ballot symbol is the most widely reproduced graphic artifact a state commissions, yet communication-design scholarship has largely ceded its study to political science. This article reframes Pakistan's official election symbols as designed communication objects and analyses their evolution from 1970 to 2024. Drawing on a purposive sample of six marks associated with major parties, the tiger, the arrow and its predecessor the sword, the bicycle, the bat, the book, and the kite, the study conducts a diachronic multimodal social-semiotic analysis through a four-layer framework grounded in Peircean sign typology, Barthesian myth, the visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen, and Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power. Primary visual data are drawn from the Election Commission of Pakistan symbol record for the general elections of 1970 to 2018 and the 2024 allotment list. The analysis advances a central argument: the ballot symbol is engineered as an instrument of inclusion, a legibility aid for citizens who cannot read a candidate's name, yet through decades of association it accrues indexical and mythic charge that converts it into an instrument of contestation and, ultimately, of exclusion. Two design events anchor the claim: the Commission's 2011 redrawing of the book from a closed volume to an open primer, an act of graphic counter-design intended to strip a sacralised connotation, and the 2024 revocation of the bat from Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, a case of state desymbolisation that reorganised an entire election. The study contributes a communication-design account of civic signs and reads the national symbol library as a pictographic lexicon of the postcolonial state.



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## Introduction

On a Pakistani ballot paper the citizen encounters three columns: a serial number, the candidate's name, and, decisively, a small monochrome pictogram (Ahmad, 2020). For the substantial share of the electorate that cannot fluently read the printed name, that pictogram is not decoration but the operative interface of the vote. Cross-national research on ballot design confirms the pattern: elaborate ballots incorporating symbols and pictures cluster precisely where literacy is lower and competitive multiparty elections are newer (Reynolds & Steenbergen, 2006), which places

Pakistan at the centre of the phenomenon rather than at its margins. The election symbol is, in the strictest sense, a work of communication design. It must carry an identity, function at a few millimetres, survive reproduction on the cheapest newsprint, and be recognised instantly by a first-time or non-literate voter standing in a curtained booth. Yet the scholarship that examines these marks belongs almost entirely to political science, where the symbol is a variable in vote choice rather than a visual object with form, syntax, and a history of redrawing. This article takes the opposite starting point: it reads Pakistan's ballot symbols as designed communication and asks what their form, evolution, and regulation reveal about how a postcolonial state manufactures political identity in pictures.

The design problem these symbols solve is severe. Their brief is to communicate party identity without language, across a heterogeneous electorate divided by tongue, region, and schooling. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) maintains a controlled library of well over one hundred and fifty approved marks, a national pictographic system from which parties are allotted a sign (ECP, 2024). The vocabulary of that library is deliberately concrete and everyday, animals, tools, vehicles, and household objects, and the rationale is iconicity: a depicted object resembles a thing the voter already knows, so recognition can proceed without reading. This is the same principle that governs wayfinding pictograms and hazard signage, and it makes the ballot symbol a genuinely design-theoretic object, a pictogram whose success is measured in recognition under duress.

The central argument of this study is that these marks are subject to a productive paradox. The ballot symbol is engineered as an instrument of inclusion. It exists so that a citizen who cannot read may still exercise a vote. But the very features that make a symbol a good inclusion device, its memorability, its emotional legibility, and its capacity to stand in for a collective, are the features that convert it, over time, into political capital. A sign chosen for accessibility becomes, through decades of association, a dense repository of loyalty, grievance, and myth. The instrument of inclusion becomes, in the same motion, an instrument of contestation and exclusion. Three emblematic marks structure the analysis and give the article its title. The bat traces the personalisation of a party symbol and its eventual state removal. The book traces the sacralisation of a civic sign and a rare episode of state counter-design. The sword, held alongside its working substitute the arrow, traces heritage, martyrdom, and the earliest instance in the period of a symbol withdrawn by the state.

The period under study, 1970 to 2024, brackets the modern electoral history of the country, from its first universal-franchise general election to the general election in which the removal of a major party's symbol became a defining controversy. Across this span the symbols of the leading parties display a remarkable graphic stability, which allows them to function as durable brands, alongside a small number of ruptures, where the politics of the sign becomes visible. This study reads both the stability and the ruptures through the lens of the designer. It attends to silhouette, iconicity, figure and ground, orientation, and the constraints of low-fidelity reproduction, and it treats the ECP itself as a design authority whose acts of drawing, allotting, and revoking marks are consequential communicative acts.

Three research objectives guide the inquiry, pitched at the analytical, evaluative, and theory-building levels rather than the descriptive. The first is to analyse the semiotic construction and diachronic evolution of the ballot symbols of Pakistan's major parties across the iconic, indexical, and symbolic registers between 1970 and 2024. The second is to critically evaluate the

connotations and myths the graphic forms of these symbols naturalise, and the formal design resources through which that naturalisation is achieved. The third is to theorise the Commission's authority to draw, allot, redraw, and revoke marks as an exercise of symbolic power over political visibility, and to synthesise from the cases a communication-design account of the civic sign. Three research questions operationalise these objectives. RQ1: How have the ballot symbols of Pakistan's major parties evolved across the iconic, indexical, and symbolic registers between 1970 and 2024, and what does that trajectory reveal about the changing function of the mark? RQ2: Through which formal resources of visual grammar do these symbols naturalise particular connotations and myths, and with what political consequences? RQ3: How does the state's design authority, evidenced in the 2011 redrawing of the book and the 2024 revocation of the bat, operate as symbolic power, and what does it imply for a theory of the civic sign?

## **Literature Review**

Scholarship on election symbols has developed unevenly across three streams, and the imbalance among them defines the gap this study addresses. The first stream, rooted in political science, understands the symbol chiefly as an input to voter behaviour. Brunn, whose work Ahmad (2020) foregrounds, observed that election symbols have been comparatively neglected even internationally, and that they have been used and equally misused to shape public opinion. Recent quantitative work has begun to establish that symbols exert an independent effect on choice. Studying the Indian case through a natural experiment in symbol allotment, Lee and Qi (2024) demonstrate that election symbols, ostensibly mere reading aids, shape voter behaviour in ways not reducible to party or candidate, and that pictures of everyday objects carry semiotic content voters read for inference about the person behind them. Ethnography deepens the point from the voter's side: Banerjee's (2014) account of Indian elections documents the popular meaning invested in the ritual and material culture of the vote, of which the symbol is a central element. These are important correctives to the assumption that the mark is inert, but in all of this work the analytic object remains the vote or the voter, not the visual artifact.

The Pakistani literature sits squarely in the behavioural tradition. Ahmad (2020), the most sustained treatment of the subject, frames the inquiry as one of politics and behaviour, concluding that parties deploy symbols tactfully to maximise their vote bank. The value of Ahmad's study for the present argument is not its behavioural finding but its archival contribution. Through interviews and documented Commission records, Ahmad reconstructs the episode in which the religious sentiment attached to the book symbol became a matter of formal regulatory concern. That episode, examined in detail below, is treated by Ahmad as evidence of tactical exploitation; this study re-reads the same evidence as a case of graphic design and counter-design. Where the political scientist asks whether the sign won votes, the communication designer asks how the sign was drawn, what it denoted and connoted, and what happened when the state intervened at the level of the image.

The second stream is the scholarship of ballot design itself. Reynolds and Steenbergen (2006) surveyed 134 ballot papers from 107 countries and established both that ballot design carries political consequences and that it is available for manipulation by those who control it. Their finding that symbol-bearing ballots concentrate in low-literacy, newly competitive electorates supplies the comparative frame within which Pakistan's system belongs. Yet this stream operates at the level of the ballot paper as a format and stops short of the individual symbol as a drawn

object with a form and a history. Between the behavioural study of the vote and the format study of the ballot lies the mark itself, unexamined.

The third stream analyses political visibility and party branding. In Pakistan, multimodal work in the tradition of Kress and van Leeuwen has read the semiotic resources of political protest and campaign communication, confirming that Pakistani parties construct identity through designed visual systems in which the leader's body, colour, and staging are central signifiers (Gul et al., 2025). Scholarship on Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf in particular documents a leader-centred political project in which the founder's celebrity persona organises the party's entire public identity (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021). Comparative design scholarship on party visual identity, such as the computational study of party logo colour across thirty-five democracies by Casiraghi et al. (2023), similarly treats the freely designed logo rather than the state-allotted civic sign, and is set in established, largely literate democracies. The corpus of this third stream is the campaign ecosystem, the poster, the rally, and the self-designed logo; the official ballot symbol, the one mark the party does not design and cannot freely change, has escaped close visual analysis.

Two absences therefore define the opportunity. First, no study reads Pakistan's ballot symbols as a coherent designed system, attentive to their formal properties, their reproduction constraints, and their diachronic evolution. Second, no study treats the state's power to draw, redraw, and revoke these marks as a design phenomenon with democratic consequences. This article addresses both. It brings the tools of graphic and communication design, iconicity, silhouette, visual grammar, and the semiotics of colour, to bear on a corpus political science has described but not seen, and it positions the 2011 redrawing of the book and the 2024 removal of the bat as the two moments where the design authority of the state becomes most legible.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Because the ballot symbol is at once a pictogram, a brand, and an instrument of state power, no single lens is adequate to it. This study therefore builds a four-layer analytical framework in which each layer captures a dimension the others miss, and applies the layers cumulatively to each mark.

The first layer is the Peircean typology of the sign, distinguishing icon, index, and symbol (Chandler, 2007; Peirce, 1931-1958). The distinction names precisely the trajectory a ballot mark travels. A symbol is allotted for its iconic value: an arrow looks like an arrow, a bicycle like a bicycle, so a non-literate voter can match the printed mark to a remembered object. Iconic transparency is the design requirement of a low-literacy ballot. But a mark used by one party across many elections ceases to be merely iconic. It becomes an index, pointing by habitual contiguity to a specific political formation, and finally a symbol in the full Peircean sense, bound to its referent by convention and collective agreement.

The second layer is Barthes's account of signification in two orders, denotation and connotation, and the operation of myth (Barthes, 1972, 1977). At the first order the mark denotes an object: a large cat, a bladed weapon, a bound book. At the second order it connotes a set of cultural values: strength, martyrdom, or piety. Myth, for Barthes, is the process by which a connotation is naturalised, made to seem obvious rather than constructed. This layer allows the study to read what each form quietly proposes as natural, the tiger's equation of party with masculine

sovereignty, the book's slide from knowledge to scripture, and to show that these are effects of design and repetition rather than intrinsic to the objects depicted.

The third layer is the visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), with its representational, interactional, and compositional metafunctions, extended by their treatment of colour as a semiotic mode (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002) and by van Leeuwen's (2005) social semiotics. Even a simple monochrome line mark has a grammar. Its vectors and orientation propose action or repose; its degree of detail sets a modality, a claim about how real or abstract the depicted thing is; and its symmetry and framing organise attention. When the mark migrates from the official monochrome ballot into the coloured campaign ecology of flags, banners, and wall-chalking, colour becomes an additional signifying resource. Machin and Mayr (2012) and Rose (2016) supply the operational vocabulary for this close reading.

The fourth layer addresses the producer of the signs. The ECP does not merely referee an electoral contest; it authors a pictographic system, allots marks, and, on occasion, redraws or withdraws them. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic power, the capacity to constitute reality through legitimate naming and, here, legitimate depiction, frames the Commission as the institution that holds a monopoly on visual legitimacy in the electoral field. Within this layer the removal of the bat and the redrawing of the book are not incidental controversies but the clearest expressions of that monopoly. A final, lighter register connects the whole repertoire to national identity and soft power (Anderson, 2006; Billig, 1995; Nye, 2004): the library of civic marks constitutes a banal, everyday iconography through which the nation is routinely pictured to itself.

## **Method**

The study adopts a qualitative, multimodal social-semiotic design appropriate to an interpretive analysis of visual artifacts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Rose, 2016). The unit of analysis is the individual ballot symbol as a designed mark, examined both synchronically, as a form with a grammar, and diachronically, as a form that persists or changes across successive elections.

The corpus is drawn from primary electoral records. The principal source is the Election Commission of Pakistan symbol record for the general elections from 1970 to 2018, compiled with the Free and Fair Election Network, which sets out, election by election, the mark contested by each party (ECP & FAFEN, n.d.). This record is the study's evidentiary backbone: it shows, for instance, that the Peoples Party contested 1970 and 1977 on the sword and every subsequent cycle on the arrow, including the 1990 and 1993 elections contested under the banner of the People's Democratic Alliance, and that Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf contested its first election, in 1997, not on the bat but on the *chiragh*, or oil lamp, adopting the bat only in 2002. The 2024 general election, which falls outside the 1970 to 2018 record, is documented through the Commission's allotment list for that year (ECP, 2024) and the associated judicial record (Election Commission of Pakistan v. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, 2024). Table 1 summarises the corpus.

**Table 1: Corpus of Ballot Symbols Analysed, With Election Cycles Contested per the Primary Record**

| Symbol  | Party (as registered)                             | Cycles contested under the mark                                                                 | Analytical status                             |
|---------|---------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Sword   | Pakistan Peoples Party                            | 1970, 1977; reallocated to the Bhutto-led PPP in recent cycles including 2024                   | Case: early state withdrawal; heritage mark   |
| Arrow   | Pakistan Peoples Party / PPP Parliamentarians     | 1988 to 2018 continuously, including 1990 and 1993 under the People's Democratic Alliance; 2024 | Case: substitution and accumulation           |
| Tiger   | Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)                    | 1993 to 2018 continuously; 2024                                                                 | Case: connotation of sovereignty              |
| Bicycle | Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid)                    | 2002, 2013; tractor from 2018                                                                   | Case: connotative dissonance and rebranding   |
| Bat     | Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf                          | 2002, 2013, 2018 (chiragh in 1997; boycott in 2008); revoked for 2024                           | Embedded critical case: desymbolisation       |
| Book    | Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F); Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal | 1988, 1990, 1997 (JUI-F); 2002 (MMA); retained in subsequent cycles including 2024              | Embedded critical case: 2011 state redrawing  |
| Kite    | Muttahida Qaumi Movement                          | 1990, 1997 (Haq Parast group); 2002 to 2018 continuously (MQM and MQM-P); 2024                  | Case: regional legibility; splinter semiotics |

*Note. Compiled from the Election Commission of Pakistan and Free and Fair Election Network symbol record for 1970 to 2018 (ECP & FAFEN, n.d.) and the ECP allotment list for the 2024 general election (ECP, 2024).*

From the full library a purposive sample of six marks was selected against three explicit criteria: the electoral significance of the carrying party, defined as having led a government or formed the principal opposition in the period; diachronic depth, defined as contest under the mark across at least three cycles or implication in a documented regulatory episode; and analytic richness across the four framework layers. The sample comprises the tiger of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz); the arrow of the Pakistan Peoples Party Parliamentarians, read together with the sword held by the Bhutto-led Peoples Party; the bicycle of the Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid); the bat of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf; the book of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (Fazl) and its alliance the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal; and the kite of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement. Two symbols additionally serve as embedded critical cases where the design authority of the state becomes explicit: the book, through the documented 2011 redrawing, and the bat, through the 2024 revocation.

Each mark was read through a four-pass analytical protocol mapped onto the framework. In the first pass the mark's position and movement on the icon-index-symbol gradient were plotted from the primary record, election by election. In the second pass the mark's denotation, connotations, and mythic operation were analysed in the Barthesian two orders. In the third pass a visual-grammar close reading examined vectors, orientation, modality, salience, and framing in the official monochrome form, and colour in the mark's campaign remediation. In the fourth pass the mark's production history, allotment, redrawing, or revocation, was read as an exercise of symbolic power. Findings from each pass were recorded in an analytical memo per mark, and cross-case themes were derived by constant comparison across the six memos. Trustworthiness is pursued through the criteria appropriate to interpretive visual research (Rose, 2016): every diachronic claim is anchored to a verifiable entry in the primary record; regulatory claims are triangulated across the ECP record, the 2024 allotment list, and the published judicial order; the analysis proceeds by thick description so each interpretation can be tested against the evidence presented; and the author's position as a design educator in Pakistan is acknowledged as the standpoint from which the designer's questions are put.

Three limitations should be stated plainly. First, the historical record reproduces the marks at low fidelity, so fine judgements about line quality or draughtsmanship in the earliest cycles rest partly on secondary description rather than on high-resolution originals. Second, faction and symbol are not always in stable correspondence, since several parties splinter and contest under near-identical marks; the analysis fixes each mark to a party per election from the primary record rather than from looser press usage. Third, the study is interpretive and makes no causal claim about the effect of any symbol on any electoral outcome; its object is meaning and form, not vote share. Where the analysis draws on the documented regulatory episodes, it relies on the records reproduced by Ahmad (2020) and on the Commission's own published documents.

## **Analysis and Findings**

### ***The Sword and the Arrow: Martyrdom, Heritage, and the Design of Substitution***

No case better illustrates the icon-to-symbol trajectory, or the earliest use of a mark as a political weapon, than the Peoples Party pair of the sword and the arrow. The primary record shows the party contesting the 1970 and 1977 elections on the sword, a mark then removed from the list of approved symbols during the martial-law period that followed 1977, as reconstructed by Ahmad (2020). From 1988 onward the party contested every cycle on the arrow, carrying the mark through the People's Democratic Alliance in 1990 and 1993, and it is the arrow, not the sword, that a generation of voters now reads as the sign of the party (ECP & FAFEN, n.d.).

As designed marks the two forms propose almost opposite arguments. The sword is a bladed weapon, heavy in silhouette, its curved form legible as a scimitar. At the level of denotation it depicts an instrument of combat; at the level of connotation it carries martyrdom, sacrifice, and martial heritage, and it is explicitly bound in party memory to the figure of the party's founder. The arrow, by contrast, is a light, directional form. Its vector points, and thereby proposes movement, aim, and forward direction. Where the sword looks backward to sacrifice, the arrow looks forward to progress, and it is no accident that the arrow became the naturalised emblem of a populist promise of advancement.

The design significance of the episode lies in the substitution itself. The removal of the sword from the approved library was an act of the state operating at the level of the image: a mark was withdrawn, and the party was compelled to adopt another. This is the earliest instance in the period of what this study calls state desymbolisation, the use of the design authority of the Commission to deny a party its chosen sign, and it prefigures the far more consequential removal of the bat decades later. The arrow, adopted under compulsion, then did what durable brands do: through repetition across successive elections it became a symbol in the full sense, an index of party and a condensation of populist feeling.

The contemporary situation refines the point in a way that is instructive for design. In recent cycles the Bhutto-led Peoples Party has held the sword as a heritage mark, the founder's symbol, while its parliamentary vehicle continues to contest on the arrow (Ahmad, 2020; ECP, 2024). The political tradition thus maintains two marks at once: a heritage symbol that carries the aura of origin and martyrdom, and a working ballot symbol that carries the accumulated recognition of the electorate. The distinction between a heritage identity and an operative identity is familiar to brand design, and its appearance in the electoral field shows how completely the ballot symbol has become a brand asset rather than a mere legibility aid.

### ***The Tiger: Apex Predator and the Grammar of Sovereignty***

The Muslim League (Nawaz) has contested on the tiger continuously since 1993 (ECP & FAFEN, n.d.). As a designed mark it is among the most rhetorically direct in the library. The tiger is an apex predator, and the connotations it naturalises, strength, dominance, fearlessness, and sovereign authority, are carried by the form itself: the muscular silhouette, the forward stance, and the bared power of the striped body. In the terms of visual grammar the depicted animal is a bearer of maximal agency, and the mark proposes the party as an equivalent force in the political field.

A translation instability sits productively at the centre of this sign. The Urdu word by which the mark is popularly named, sher, spans both lion and tiger, and the Commission has at points designated the mark as tiger while campaign usage invokes the lordly sher of rally chant and slogan. The graphic rendering resolves the ambiguity toward the striped tiger, the national animal, but the linguistic slippage is itself meaningful: the sign draws simultaneously on the tiger's indigenous, national resonance and on the lion's inherited connotations of kingship. For a designer this is a case where the referent is stabilised by drawing even as it remains unstable in language, a doubleness that enlarges the sign's reach.

The tiger also exemplifies a pattern the discussion returns to: the masculine and martial cast of the most electorally successful marks. Strength, predation, and dominance are the values the form makes natural, and they are gendered. The tiger, read beside the sword and the bat, belongs to a repertoire in which sovereignty is pictured as masculine force.

### ***The Bicycle: A Populist Vehicle for an Establishment Party***

The Muslim League (Quaid) contested on the bicycle in 2002 and 2013 before shifting to the tractor in 2018 (ECP & FAFEN, n.d.). The bicycle is a revealing mark because its connotations sit in tension with the party that carries it. As a designed object the bicycle denotes the most democratic of vehicles: cheap, human-powered, universally legible, the transport of the ordinary



worker and the rural commuter. Its connotations are humility, accessibility, and everyday mobility. Yet the party formed around the mark emerged as an establishment vehicle of elite realignment. The gap between the proletarian sign and the patrician party is precisely the kind of connotative dissonance Barthesian analysis is designed to surface, and it demonstrates that the meaning a ballot symbol carries is not guaranteed by the party's character but is proposed by the form and negotiated in reception.

The later migration from bicycle to tractor is itself a design decision. The tractor retains the rural, working register of the bicycle while adding mechanised power and agrarian scale, a shift in connotation from humble mobility to productive force. Read as a rebranding, the change shows a party adjusting the values its mark naturalises while remaining within a coherent semantic field of the land and the common worker.

### ***The Bat: Personalisation and the Trauma of Desymbolisation***

The bat is the study's central case, and the primary record corrects a common assumption about it. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf did not begin with the bat. In its first election, in 1997, the party contested on the chiragh, the oil lamp, adopting the bat only in 2002; it boycotted the 2008 election and returned on the bat in 2013 and 2018 (ECP & FAFEN, n.d.). This evolution matters, because it shows the bat to be a chosen, constructed identity rather than an original one, and because the choice is unusually personal. The cricket bat is not an abstract value like justice or a collective like the worker. It indexes one man, the party's founder and his celebrated career as a cricket captain, and it converts a biography into a ballot mark. Where the arrow condenses a movement and the tiger a quality, the bat condenses a person. It is, in design terms, a monogram of charisma, and scholarship on the party confirms that the founder's persona organises its entire political identity (Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021).

This personalisation gave the bat extraordinary recognition value, and it is the sharpness of that recognition that made its removal so consequential. The legal sequence deserves precision. On 22 December 2023 the Commission, acting under the intra-party election provisions of the Elections Act 2017, ruled the party ineligible to retain the bat on the ground that it had failed to hold valid internal elections. The Peshawar High Court restored the symbol on 10 January 2024. Three days later, on 13 January 2024, a three-member bench of the Supreme Court led by the Chief Justice set the High Court decision aside and upheld the Commission's order (Election Commission of Pakistan v. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, 2024). With the deadline for symbol allotment expiring that same night, the party's candidates were compelled to contest as independents, each under a different, unfamiliar mark drawn from the general library, and the party lost its entitlement to reserved seats.

Read as a design event, this is desymbolisation in its fullest form. In an electorate where recognition of a single stable mark is the very mechanism that lets a non-literate voter locate a party, dispersing a party's candidates across a scatter of unrelated marks is not a technicality but a communicative amputation. The state, exercising its monopoly on the design of the ballot, withdrew the one sign that made the party legible at a glance and replaced coherence with noise. The episode demonstrates, more vividly than any other in the period, that the authority to design and revoke a mark is a form of power over political visibility itself.

### ***The Book: Sacralised Connotation and the State as Counter-Designer***

The book, contested by Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (Fazl) and by the religious alliance Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, is the clearest case in the corpus of connotation weaponised, and it yields the study's most striking instance of the state intervening as a designer. At the level of denotation the mark is simply a bound book, and its ordinary connotation is knowledge; the party itself defends the sign as a symbol of ilm, of learning, consonant with the meaning of ulema (Ahmad, 2020). But in a religio-political context the connotation is unstable and slides readily toward scripture. Campaign practice, as documented by Ahmad (2020), encouraged the reading of the mark as the sacred Book, with the equation of a vote for the symbol to fidelity to the holy text, so that a civic sign became, in effect, a religious injunction.

What makes the episode invaluable for communication design is the state's response, which was itself an act of graphic redesign. Confronted with the sacralised reading, the Commission resolved in 2011 to alter the appearance of the mark: the closed book, whose blank cover invited identification with scripture, was to be redrawn as an open book bearing the Urdu letters alif and bay on one page and the sum two plus two equals four on the other, so as to differentiate it from the holy Book (Ahmad, 2020). The state, acting as counter-designer, intervened at the level of the sign's denotation in order to kill a connotation. By adding the ordinary marks of secular literacy, an alphabet primer and an arithmetic sum, the Commission attempted to re-anchor the mark to knowledge and to foreclose its reading as scripture. That the party then resisted the redrawing, and sought to retain the closed volume, only confirms how much connotative value was at stake, and how consciously the closed form had been exploited.

The book therefore stages, in a single mark, the whole argument of this study. A civic sign designed for legibility acquired a sacral connotation; the connotation became political capital; and the state responded not with speech but with design, redrawing the object to strip the myth. That the intervention was contested shows that in a low-literacy electorate the smallest formal choices, whether a book is open or closed, whether its pages are blank or printed, are matters of real political consequence. The designer's decisions are, here, indistinguishable from the state's.

### ***The Kite: Urban Vernacular and the Politics of Regional Legibility***

The kite, carried by the Muttahida Qaumi Movement from 1990 and continuously from 2002 (ECP & FAFEN, n.d.), is the corpus's clearest instance of a mark rooted in a specific regional and ethnolinguistic vernacular. As a designed form the kite is light, angular, and airborne, and its connotations are play, festivity, and lift. But its meaning is not evenly distributed across the national territory. The kite belongs to the urban culture of Karachi and to the Urdu-speaking constituency the party represents, and it draws on a vernacular of kite-flying that is celebratory in the party's urban heartland and, owing to safety-driven prohibition, criminalised elsewhere, so the same mark reads as festive lift in one region and as a banned practice in another. The kite thus exposes a limit of the iconic ballot symbol: iconicity promises universal legibility, but the connotations of a depicted practice are regionally specific, and a single mark can carry incompatible meanings across a divided electorate.

The kite also participates in a recurrent structural motif in which party fragmentation is fought on the terrain of the near-identical mark. As the movement split, factions contested under closely related signs, the kite set beside the candle of the Haqiqi and Mohajir factions, so that the

difference between organisations was carried by a small difference between images (ECP & FAFEN, n.d.). For a designer this is the semiotics of the almost-same, where identity and schism are negotiated not through wholly distinct marks but through minimal graphic variation within a shared visual family.

## **Discussion**

Read together, the six marks yield cross-cutting interpretations that a single-symbol analysis would miss; each can now be set in dialogue with the literature.

The first interpretation concerns the icon-to-symbol gradient as a general law of the ballot mark. Every symbol in the sample was allotted for its iconic transparency, yet each of the electorally significant marks has travelled far along the path from icon to full symbol, functioning by convention rather than by resemblance. This extends the behavioural finding of Lee and Qi (2024) in a direction their synchronic design cannot reach: where their natural experiment shows that a symbol carries semiotic content at the moment of allotment, the Pakistani record shows what happens to that content across half a century of repetition. The feature that qualifies a mark for a low-literacy ballot, plain iconic legibility, is not the feature that ultimately governs its political force; force accrues through repetition and myth. The designer of a civic sign is therefore not merely solving a legibility problem in the present but seeding an identity that will, if the mark endures, outgrow its original iconic function entirely.

The second interpretation is the splinter-symbol motif, the semiotics of the almost-same. Across the corpus, party fragmentation is repeatedly negotiated through minimal graphic difference rather than wholesale redesign: the Peoples Party lineage divides between the sword and the arrow; the Tehreek-e-Insaf family divides between the bat and the batsman, the splinter Nazriati faction contesting the 2018 election under the figure of a batsman wielding the parent party's object (ECP & FAFEN, n.d.); and the Qaumi Movement divides between the kite and the candle. This condition inverts the isomorphism documented in party-logo scholarship. Casiraghi et al. (2023) show parties in established democracies converging voluntarily on shared chromatic codes to signal ideological family; in Pakistan, near-identity within a visual family is imposed by the constrained state library, and the burden of discrimination falls on the voter, who is asked to tell siblings apart at a glance. The constrained library thus turns political rupture into a problem of graphic near-identity, a condition without counterpart where parties draw their own logos.

The third interpretation is the distinction between a heritage mark and a working mark, drawn most sharply by the Peoples Party's simultaneous holding of the sword for memory and the arrow for the operative ballot. The electoral symbol is managed with the logic of legacy and currency that governs commercial identity, and its study belongs as much to branding as to electoral administration.

The fourth interpretation concerns religious connotation as a design strategy and the state's capacity to counter it. The book shows that connotation can be deliberately cultivated, that a closed volume can be made to read as scripture, and, uniquely, that the state can respond in kind, redrawing the object to disrupt the myth. In Bourdieu's (1991) terms, the 2011 intervention is symbolic power exercised not through legitimate naming but through legitimate depiction: the Commission policed meaning at the level of form. This is perhaps the study's most consequential

observation for design theory. In this electoral context the smallest formal decisions are instruments of governance, and the boundary between the designer and the regulator dissolves.

The fifth interpretation is the state as the ultimate author of meaning, expressed most forcefully through desymbolisation. Reynolds and Steenbergen (2006) establish that ballot design is available for manipulation by those who control it; the Pakistani record supplies the limit case, in which control is exercised not by biasing a format but by withdrawing a sign. From the removal of the sword in the martial-law period to the revocation of the bat in 2024, the same power recurs: the authority that designs and allots the marks can also withdraw them, and withdrawal in a low-literacy electorate is a direct action upon a party's visibility, a power over who can be seen on the ballot at all.

The sixth interpretation is a gendered pattern in the repertoire itself. The most electorally dominant marks, the tiger, the sword, and the bat, share a semantic field of predation, combat, and sporting conquest, and that field is coded masculine; feminine and domestic registers are largely confined to minor marks. This aligns with the broader finding of leader-centred, masculine political communication in Pakistan (Gul et al., 2025; Shakil & Yilmaz, 2021) and treats the composition of the symbol library not as neutral but as a representational choice with its own politics.

Taken together these interpretations support reading the ballot library as a national visual lexicon, a banal but pervasive iconography through which the nation is routinely pictured to itself (Anderson, 2006; Billig, 1995). The everyday objects of the list, tools, animals, vehicles, and books, compose a vernacular through which political belonging is made legible without language, and the depth of popular investment in that vernacular is consistent with what ethnography records of South Asian electoral culture (Banerjee, 2014). In this sense the ECP's pictographic system is a soft instrument of national self-representation (Nye, 2004), and its marks are among the most widely circulated designed images the state produces.

## **Conclusion**

This article has argued that Pakistan's ballot symbols are best understood as designed communication objects, and that reading them as such reveals a politics that behavioural analysis leaves in shadow. Approached through a four-layer framework of Peircean typology, Barthesian myth, visual grammar, and symbolic power, and grounded in the primary symbol record from 1970 to 2024, the corpus discloses a consistent paradox: a mark engineered as an instrument of inclusion becomes, through repetition and myth, political capital that can be sacralised, fought over, and withdrawn.

The contribution is threefold. Empirically, the study provides the first diachronic account of Pakistan's major ballot symbols as a designed system, anchored to the primary electoral record. Theoretically, it introduces desymbolisation and state counter-design as concepts through which the regulation of civic signs can be analysed, and it identifies the electoral commission as an active designer whose smallest formal choices carry consequence. Disciplinarily, it returns the ballot symbol to communication design and demonstrates that the field has a substantive account to give of democratic life in low-literacy electorates.

Several limitations bound these claims and mark directions for further work. The analysis is interpretive and makes no causal claim about votes; the archival fidelity of the earliest marks is imperfect; and the sample, though purposive and significant, is confined to major parties. Future research might extend the reading to the full library as a designed system, examine the vernacular remediation of ballot marks in wall-chalking and campaign craft, compare Pakistan's civic pictography with that of other low-literacy electorates such as India's, and investigate empirically how voters read redrawn or unfamiliar marks. Each of these would deepen the claim this study has sought to establish: that the design of the civic sign is not a technical footnote to democracy but one of the places where its meaning is made.

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