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# MYREDLINE - SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS IN FRAGILE STATES

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# INTRODUCTION

*“MyRedLine is that peace should not be for a year or two. Peace must be permanent.”*

This statement is part of the Afghan social media campaign “MyRedLine” [MRL] which was launched in 2019, aiming to give Afghans a voice, verbalising their emotions and thoughts on the Taliban regime. The campaign consists of video clips that have been shared among several social media platforms and have gained a lot of public attention.

Social media campaigns have been found to be quite effective, especially in fragile states such as Afghanistan. Due to their ability to initiate a dialogue in society they can have an actual impact on peacebuilding processes (Stremlau, 2013).

Using MRL as an example, this essay aims to analyse the way social media campaigns work in fragile states such as Afghanistan. Firstly, an introduction is to be given on the general and historical background of the country Afghanistan and its development. Then, a theoretical overview on the structure and logic behind social media campaigns is to be given. Following this, the theoretic background is going to be applied to the case of MRL. To summarise this essay, the findings are going to be reviewed in a short discussion reflecting on the workings of social media campaigns in general and specifically of those in fragile states.

## 1 BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON AFGHANISTAN

The etymology of the name “Afghanistan” goes back to the 1500s and 1600s, however, then the name “Khorasan” was more commonly used for the country (Menzfeld, 2022). Afghanistan’s history is dominated by invasions and frail governments. The first series of invasions mark the three Anglo-Afghan Wars that took place over a duration of almost a century and came to an end by Afghanistan gaining official independence in 1919 and being declared a monarchy (Menzfeld, 2022). In 1973, the then prime minister Daoud Khan overthrew the king and made himself president, establishing the Republic of Afghanistan. As a pro-Soviet leader Khan kept close bonds with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics [USSR] which led to the Soviet Union invading Afghanistan in 1979, proclaiming to defend Afghanistan from their opponents. The power control by the Soviet Union lasted for a decade before they withdrew their troops from the country in 1989 (Bogaert, 2022).

The withdrawal of the USSR left the new president Najibullah with a pro-communist government having to defend the country from rebel groups. In 1992, the Islamic group Mujahadeen, militias who originally united to fight the Soviet Union, overthrew the government. The Mujahadeen were not able to provide stability to Afghanistan which ultimately led to the country sliding into civil war (Bogaert, 2022). Within that civil war, the Taliban formed from within the Mujahadeen. They started as a group of

ultraconservative Afghan students and took over Kabul by 1996, claiming Afghanistan (Bogaert, 2022). The Taliban also provided sanctuary to the terrorist group Al Qaeda. From Afghanistan Al Qaeda bombed embassies of the United States [US] and held terrorist training camps in Afghanistan which led to the US bombing Afghanistan in return, but the Taliban refused to surrender Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden to let him go to trial in the US (Bogaert, 2022). The situation escalated on the 9th of September 2001 with the attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. Following the events and the US again demanding to surrender bin Laden, the United States and the United Kingdom launched airstrikes on Afghanistan and invaded it, forcing the collapse of the Taliban government (Menzfeld, 2022).

For almost two decades the US maintained power over Afghanistan, viewing their role as a stabilising influence while the Taliban quietly recovered in Pakistan. Those years were characterised by the Taliban gaining control back over parts of the country, the US increasing their troops, peace talks with the Taliban and thousands of Afghans fleeing the country (Menzfeld, 2022). In 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed a final peace agreement, leading to a withdrawal of all US troops from Afghanistan. Within days of the execution of the withdrawal, the Afghan government collapsed leading to the Taliban taking power in Kabul (Bogaert, 2022).

The ruling of the Taliban is shaped by them “notoriously disregarding human rights” (Bogaert, 2022, p. 2) like the freedom of movement and expression as well as the rights to work and to education. This also includes the freedom of and the access to media that shape the life of Afghans every day (Bogaert, 2022).

## 2 SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS IN FRAGILE STATES

The media and social media in particular, have been found to have the potential to reduce the risk of division in fragile states as well as improving the opportunities for dialogue between the conflict parties and can thus function as an assistance in such states (Deane, 2013). In the following paragraph, we will offer a definition for social media campaigns and present general information, effects and impacts of those campaigns as well as introducing the social media campaign MyRedLine that was active in Afghanistan from 2019 to 2020. We will present basic information on the campaign and its timeline and will afterwards focus on the impact the campaign had.

### 2.1 Social Media Campaigns

In 1997, the first social media platform “Sixdegrees.com” launched. Since then, many have followed such as Facebook, X (formerly: Twitter) and Instagram. Social media platforms can be defined as platforms that foster dynamic two-way communication in a non-scripted environment (Kim, 2020). Through its fluid nature, social media can organise people with mutual interests in groups initiated, created, and driven

by them and also offer new ways for users to communicate, interact and share information (Kim, 2020). Campaigns being displayed through social media can create a less formal and more immediate way for their content being delivered to individuals. Furthermore, the users gain the opportunity to interact with the campaign by directly responding to it or commenting and publicly voicing their opinion (Xenos, Macafee & Pole, 2017). That way, social media can enhance campaigns' appeal to their audiences and can be useful for both the spreading of information as well as the changing of behaviour (Freeman, Potente, Rock & McIver, 2015). Social media campaigns can be especially useful if their aim is to display a more personal and vulnerable side of a person, group, or organisation. They are often used by politicians for that specific reason of having themselves portrait in a more personal and approachable manner (Xenos et al., 2017). In addition, campaigning via social media provides campaigners with a cost-effective way of running campaigns while allowing them to experiment with different strategies and approaches. Using social media as a platform is therefore way more accessible, requires less resources and is less risky as it is an easier and less expensive way to campaign than other types of campaigns (Freeman et al., 2015). Furthermore, launching a campaign through social media can be advantageous because it enables the campaigners to simultaneously and automatically collect the users data for future purposes or direct analytics (Freeman et al., 2015).

Because they allow all parties to have a media presence and offer the opportunity to campaign more freely and independently, social media campaigns can be especially impactful in influencing power relations within the political context (Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016). Furthermore, stand-alone social media campaigns can create results on their own because they have the potential to reach audiences outside the intended target group and can therefore spread way wider, even across borders, than campaigns through other media outlets (Freeman et al., 2015).

Social media campaigns are found to be particularly important in fragile states because they increase the accessibility to information and communication. Through social media, citizens are granted a social space to exchange opinions, find like-minded people and organise themselves. Through that, social media can “create the conditions for, and sometimes undermine the chances of, sustainable political settlements.” (Deane, 2013, p.4). By that, social media campaigns can be a crucial factor in peacebuilding processes (Stremlau, 2013).

## 2.2 MyRedLine

The social media campaign MyRedLine was first launched in 2019, when the Taliban did not rule Afghanistan. When it was launched, the United States of America, the Afghan government and the Taliban were holding the so-called “peace talks” (Menzfeld, 2022).

MRL was established in order to voice Afghans’ thoughts on these peace talks and the general political situation, and to “preserve the achievements of the past two decades” (*MyRedLine*, 2020), meaning the two decades while and after the Taliban ruled. The campaign is aimed to be taken into consideration by

the parties participating in the peace talks, giving them insight into the sentiments of the citizens of Afghanistan (*MyRedLine*, 2020).

When first launched, the campaign consisted of 30 short video clips, each presenting a resident of the Afghan capital city Kabul, voicing their view on the aforementioned peace talks. They each state their personal “RedLine”. The term red line is defined as “an issue or a demand that one person or group refuses to change their opinion about during a disagreement or negotiations” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2024). In this case, a RedLine is also understood as a personal statement concerning the political situation Afghans want to share with the world (*MyRedLine*, 2020). The colour red was chosen to be associated with the blood that was spilled under the Taliban regime (*MyRedLine*, 2020). Generally, the statements are supposed to deal with personal boundaries that should not be crossed by the Taliban, but the phrase is used also in a broader term and not always applied to a specific context or situation. The first RedLine for example was stated by journalist Farahnaz Forotan: “My RedLine is my pen and my freedom of expression” (*MyRedLine*, 2021), meaning that she does not want the Taliban to take away her freedom of expressing herself through written word. Farahnaz Forotan is also the founder of the campaign, alongside Ferdous Saminm. The first RedLine was accompanied by the question “What is your RedLine?”, calling other people to action, urging them to share their personal RedLines. On the MLR-Website there is also an option to submit a personal contribution via text, voice note or video, although due to the inactivity of the campaign since the Taliban have come back into power the upload portal is currently not accessible. The website also provides a newsletter that visitors can subscribe to. This enables active user-participation, an advantage of campaigning through social media (Xenos, Macafee & Pole, 2017).

The MRL videos were shot by professional videographers and photographers and shared directly on the MRL website. Among the campaign videos there are some that only consist of a few seconds, the shortest one being 13 seconds whilst the longest video has a duration of 2 minutes and 20 seconds. They are all subtitled in English for an international audience and especially the US officials involved in the peace talks to understand them. According to Stremlau (2013), social media campaigns can have a large impact on peacebuilding processes. Therefore, the MLR campaign could have had a high potential of taking influence on the peace talks. The campaign being available with English subtitles also enabled people outside of Afghanistan to understand their message and gave the campaign a broader audience, which increased its power (Freeman et al., 2015).

To announce the campaign, a trailer was posted in which different people write short statements in red writing and also hold up red ribbons to symbolise their red lines. There are no English subtitles available for this launch trailer. The first share of videos only included Kabul residents, but after the campaign quickly gained a lot of attention, it was expanded to other provinces of Afghanistan, Helmand, Kandahar and Bamiyan (*MyRedLine*, 2020).

The videos are all centred on the person who is sharing their red line. In terms of content, they are dealing

with issues of peace and war, a lot of them also focus on women and women's rights, and a few also discuss the topic of education. What is most apparent in the campaign videos is the aspect of sustaining peace, and not going backwards (*MyRedLine*, 2021). The videos are highly personal and emotional. Thereby, the importance of the topic is conveyed in an emotional matter, making the campaign more impactful (Xenos et al., 2017).

To give an idea of how the videos are constructed, two of them are now to be summarised shortly. The first video is the very first video to have been published, stating the aforementioned line "My RedLine is my pen!" (*MyRedLine*, 2021). It shows Farahnaz Forotan sitting in a dark room, surrounded by red light in the background. She says the following words while holding up a pen: "I am a journalist. I will be a journalist. My red line is my pen and my freedom of expression. What is your red line?" (*MyRedLine*, 2021).

The second video shows Siddiquallah Khaliq, father of two daughters from Kandahar. He is standing in front of the camera outside with a blurred background of trees. His red line is wanting his daughters to be able to finish their education, graduate from high school and attend university (*MyRedLine*, 2021). Talking about the progress Afghanistan has made in terms of establishing a freedom of speech, he states: "In general, these are the hopes and dreams - that we are waiting for a peace [while] preserving these achievements [that] sustained the current developed systems within the values of the Republic of Afghanistan. This [the preservation of these achievements] is also my red line" (*MyRedLine*, 2021).

On the MRL website, the campaign initiators claim that "the campaign has created nearly 20 million social media impressions" (*MyRedLine*, 2020). They state that it has also impacted Afghans to start using the term "RedLine" in their daily lives to describe issues that they feel are important in the context of the current political situation. What is also to be noticed by looking at the results of the campaign is that there is a large difference between the impression the Taliban have given of the Afghan society and the actual situation in the country. This is a valuable takeaway for both parties. Generally, the campaign offered Afghan citizens a social forum to share their views and connect with likeminded people, one of the advantages of social media campaigns, especially looking at the fact that Afghanistan is considered a fragile state (Deane, 2013, p.4).

### 3. Concluding Discussion

The MRL campaign has had a significant impact on Afghan citizens and shows that there is a strong will amongst them to improve the political situation in their country. It has given them a chance to voice their thoughts and feelings. Looking at the campaign from a personal point of view, it could also be assumed that it has brought people closer together, realising that they share the same views and opinions. Considering the tense political situation, this could be really valuable for people living in social and political isolation. The fact that the campaign initiators claim that the term “RedLine” has been established as a common term in political debates also shows that there has been an impact on society.

Still, it remains unclear whether the campaign had an actual political impact on the peace talks. While this is hard to judge now that the Taliban have overtaken the political power again, the campaign could maybe have targeted a more specific goal, as online campaigning is most effective “when there is a clear and achievable call to action” (Freeman, Potente, Rock & Melver, 2015, p. 5). On the one hand, there has been a call to action towards the Afghan society to share their RedLines, yet on the other hand there was no specific call to action towards any political party or influence. The website states that the “US officials sitting with the Taliban in Doha” (*MyRedLine*, 2020) are considered the target audience of the campaign, yet they are not addressed directly in any of the videos. Also, it is to be assumed that the campaign only reached a vast part of the population, as a high percentage of Afghans has no access to the internet and social media (Khalvatgar, 2024). Therefore, it can be debated whether social media campaigns are actually suitable for fragile states such as Afghanistan, where there is a large inequality concerning the levels of technological advance or if they might have more potential to be influential in democracies. This could be another interesting aspect to be looked at in future research. Moreover, speaking up on political matters in a fragile state can potentially be dangerous in terms of political prosecution. The people who participated in the campaign can be traced by their names and the mentions of their hometowns. Sometimes there is also information on their jobs and workplaces provided, that could potentially set them at risk of being persecuted by the Taliban.

Generally, the campaign did prove effective as there has been a certain impact on society. The political impact though could have been more powerful. Unfortunately, the campaign has been put to a hold due to the return of the Taliban in 2020.

To conclude, the campaign *MyRedLine* has been proven exemplary to research social media campaigns in fragile states. As MRL shows, social media campaigns in such states come with great opportunities but also limitations in terms of safety, technology and reaching the actual target group. Nevertheless, a social media campaign can be a good choice especially for those reasons as realising a campaign on social media is a lower risk in terms of cost and resources in general (Freeman et al., 2015)



That way a campaign can be started with little resources and develop from there, exploring its reach, impact, and development possibility.

MyRedLine worked as a great example of how social media campaigns can be utilised and spread awareness in and outside the country of origin. Nonetheless, with the withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan, the Taliban taking over power and the campaign having been inactive for several years, the actual success and impact MRL had is questionable. It is difficult to measure the results the campaign had within and outside Afghanistan. However, MRL has been an innovative project that would be a great opportunity to be picked up again and be continued one day.

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