



Ethnic Identity and Political Construction: An Anthropological Analysis of Baluchistan's Struggle for Autonomy in Pakistan

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Abstract: *One of the complex issues in Balochistan is the autonomy movement that concerns historical grievances, and social and political phenomena bringing state institutions forefront while contesting Baloch identity. This study aims to present some basics of Baloch identity and its conflict with the state, also considering it as a contribution to academic categories of political anthropology; ethnic politics and identity construction in the Pakistani context. This study delves into the complex realm of ethnic politics and identity formation in Pakistan, examining Balochistan – a distinct marginal province. Developing an in-depth analysis of the historical climate, dynamics within that time and state institutions this research uses political anthropology to understand not only Baloch ethnic identity but also autonomy against Pakistan..*

Key Words: Ethnic Identity, Autonomy, Political Construction

Introduction

The Balochistan autonomy movement is a multi-pronged campaign for additional autonomy and self-determination in the domain of Pakistan. The movement's bases can be traced back to historical oppression, cultural uniqueness and economic dominance of the Pakistani state (Grare, 2013). Although the demands of the Baloch national movement have covered various degrees from better cultural, economic and political rights to full-scale secession and creation of an independent state Balochistan majority submits a desire for autonomy in provinces rather than independence (Grare, 2013).

The movement, highly left-wing influenced Marxist is deeply split between several separatist factions that struggle for higher

autonomy or even self-law. However, the repressive response of the state towards demands for increased autonomy has only further aggravated the conflict and resulted in continuous bloodshed along with insurgency (Mendez, 2020). The aspiration of the Baloch people to gain independence has been shaped by their distinct cultural and tribal identities the nationalist movement is seen as a secular and Marxist influence (Mendez, 2020).

The autonomy movement in Balochistan raises a lot of controversy within wider Pakistani society and has important political and socio-cultural repercussions for the area. The demands of the movement and the government's reaction to these demands have exacerbated the conflict, revealing the intricate interaction of past injustices and

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socio-political variables in the Baloch autonomy movement (Hashmi, [2015](#)).

Historical animosities, cultural identification and economic greed by the Pakistani state provide impetus to this movement. The Baloch, who are mainly Sunni Muslims have a unique cultural as well as tribal identity that is important in defining their nationalistic aims (Hashmi, [2015](#)). The fight for self-determination has evolved into a perpetual war and violence within the region, with different separatist groups demanding increased autonomy or even secession (Gopalan, [2022](#)).

Objectives

- To shed light on historical injustice and other socio-political aspects behind the Balochistan autonomy movement.
- In order to demonstrate the function of state institutions in constructing and challenging Baloch identity.
- To gather the Political construction, ethnic identity and aspirations from the government of Pakistan as per Balochistan perception.

Methodology

In this paper, the qualitative methodology has been used to analyse primary and secondary sources including academic articles journals, books as well in reports. The historical, political and sociocultural factors that have propelled the Balochistan autonomy movement were also analysed. Qualitative methodology is appropriate for this study; it provides opportunities to investigate a complex and multi-layered issue of the Balochistan autonomy movement in detail. Qualitative research methods are helpful in gaining insights into social phenomena, especially ethnic politics and identity construction or the subjectivity of individuals and groups (Busetto, Wick, & Gumbinger, [2020](#)). The use of primary and secondary sources allows the researcher to access numerous points of view on Balochistan's autonomy, however. The primary data has

been collected through online interviews from the Balochi community, using a semi-structured interview guide. The background traced the historical, political and sociocultural elements that have led to the creation of the Balochistan autonomy movement by providing a critical conceptual analysis. In general, the qualitative approach is appropriate for this experiment because it gives an in-depth analysis of the autonomy movement in Balochistan and its root causes.

Historical Injustices and Socio-political Factors

The main historical injustice that has contributed to the Balochistan autonomy movement are annexation of Kalat state with Pakistan in 1948, which caused resistance from Baluch nationalists (Levesque, [2013](#)) The Baloch identity, envisaged as vetoed by the state and originating from language, culture and territory has been alleged for precipitating an intensified conflict (Levesque, [2013](#)). However, the state of continued repression by Pakistani security forces has radicalized the Baloch nationalist movement that initially was working within a framework of the federal constitution to achieve more political rights and fuels ethnic violence and sectarianism in this region (Grare, [2013](#)).

The Baloch community has often demanded a greater degree of autonomy from the central government, lamenting historical grievances concerning minority imbalance and human rights abuse perpetrated by security forces (Tanner, [2019](#)). The Balochs consider their struggle as a quest for the rectification of historical injustices, repression and self-determination (Mendez, [2020](#)). To that end, the different factors in the study have focused on the repression of civilian populations and increased military action by the Pakistan Army during the projection period (Grare, [2013](#)). Some key responses include:

Repression: The use of excessive force and human rights violations by the government include extrajudicial executions, and forced

disappearances which have been perpetrated against Baloch separatists from Pakistan. This has only aggravated the strife and made it even more radical than it was a Baloch nationalist movement (Grare, 2013).

Negotiations: There have been some negotiations between the government and separatist factions, but these attempts were met with consternation and mistrust among Baloch. The stalling of these talks has further emboldened the call for more autonomy and self-determination in this region (Prasad & Patrick, 2023).

Economic development: The government has tried to solve the economic imbalances in Balochistan through a focus on the development of infrastructure and CPEC i.e. Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Prasad & Patrick, 2023). Nevertheless, these have not been adequate to address the basic socio-economic causes behind the Balochistan autonomy movements (Prasad & Patrick, 2023).

Political solutions: The government has been requested to grant true powers to the Balochi people and create a constitutional credible representative of the ruling body called the 'Baloch government' in order for it become possible not only to reduce violence but also represent this region on national level (Grare, 2013). On the other hand, timidity in giving away relevant powers has only amplified nationalist sentiments (Hashmi, 2015).

Finally, the Pakistani government's approach towards the Balochistan autonomy movement consisted of suppression, talks, economic development and political settlement. While some of these endeavours were directed to alleviate the systemic socio-political aspects that led participants into movement, others drove conflict and radicalized the Baloch nationalist movement.

Role of State Institutions

State institutions have played a vital role in shaping and challenging the identity of Baloch. On the other side, this single

nationalism promoted by the state through Islam and Urdu has been seen as a threat to Baloch identity (Ahmad, 2018). Meanwhile, the state's unwillingness to bestow real powers on the Baloch people only added fuel to the fires of the nationalist movement (Ahmad, 2018). Since the demands for greater autonomy were put forward, the reaction of the state has been repression and violence that only inflamed conflict. According to recent news reports (Hussain, 2024), The response to the Balochistan autonomy movement by Pakistan's government has been ruthless repression, entailing a "kill and dump" policy (Hussain, 2024).

This policy encompasses thousands of ethnic Baloch who are suspected to be either a rebel or support the movement resulting in their killing and disappearance. The government is charged with human rights violations concerning Baloch separatists, such as extrajudicial killings and disappearances. The Baloch community have been demonstrating during the custodial killing of a victim Balaach Mola Baksh, who was said to be shot dead while in police custody. The Baloch Solidarity Committee has informed that more than 160 of the protesters have already been released while over one hundred are still in custody and some are missing. To solve the Balochistan issue, merely addressing its people's socio-economic issues is not enough and all political solutions for underlying grievances should be made. This makes the Balochistan autonomy movement a very complicated issue that continues to affect the political and socio-cultural landscape in this region (Hussain, 2024).

As state is not willing for Balochistan as a separate identity, as Balochistan is one of the largest provinces of Pakistan. Secondly, the land of Balochistan is vital because of so many factors, one of the reasons is Gwadar (Afaqi & Askari, 2022). The Gwadar Port in Pakistan's Balochistan province is one of the most important parts of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and a key element in China's influence on South Asia

(foundation, 2018). The port is regarded as a connection to the Belt and Road Initiative and Maritime Silk Road, through which development can be brought to that region (Ismail, 2014). Nevertheless, concerns over the Balochistan autonomy movement have been raised regarding the port's impact on the tribal and family life of Baloch (Ismail, 2014). According to one of the respondents:

"Autonomy of Balochistan actually refers to its long coastal belt and rich for its cultural and tribal values makes it an autonomous province"

The Baloch people have also raised questions as to why there are no major roadways of the latest state-of-the-art design connecting Baluchistan with Afghanistan, which facilitates the transportation of contraband and prevents easy trade of goods from Gwadar Port to Central Asia Russia through Afghanistan (Ismail, 2014). The Baloch people are demonstrating against the murder of Balaach Mola Bakhsh, who was killed in police custody (Hussain, 2024).

The Pakistani government has been blamed for employing disproportionate force and violations of human rights against the Baloch separatists such as extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances (Hussain, 2024). A political solution is required to address the socio-economic discontent and demand for autonomy peculiar to the Balochistan Issue (Malik, 2012). As per respondent said:

"Balochistan needs to be autonomous in terms of everything, that is political construction, and our ethnic values. As we are totally depending on the federal government and fighting for our equal rights"

Political Construction, Ethnic Identity and Aspirations from the Government of Pakistan as per Balochistan Perception

The major demands of the Baloch people from the Pakistan government have been primarily political and economic autonomy. These demands include more cultural, economic and political freedoms to self-determination in some cases or secession coupled with the

formation of a sovereign state for Balochistan. A reallocation of power has been attempted by the Baloch people, with the federal government being in control only over certain parts while they have a greater influence on their day-to-day lives (Ahmad, 2018). Demands have also included factors that attempt to meet the historical complaints of the Baloch nation and absorption in the country (Chan, 2019). However, the Baloch have protested against Islamabad's policies and still remain a separate group untouched by efforts made to include them as part of mainstream Pakistani life (Chan, 2019). Over the years of resistance to authority, demands from Baloch people have been also shaped by a desire for greater independence and self-governance.

The activist leading the 'March against Baloch Genocide' from Turbat to Islamabad, Dr. Mahrang said she knows that "Islamabad will never do justice to Balochs" (Veengas, 2023). She is a victim herself as her father was abducted twice – in 2006 and 2019 Her father, Abdul Ghaffar Lango's body was mutilated in 2011 as he belonged to a prominent Baloch nationalist activist.

Carrying the marks from early bereavement and extrajudicial killing, when she spoke of her dilemmas, there came out through the depths of her eyes and in words.

"When you ask why my voice is tough; I will tell you it is not hard, but sadness inflicted upon Balochistan from the first day of its annexation with Pakistan" she said.

According to the Express Tribune news, a Baloch activist said:

We are required to end forced disappearances and extra-judicial murders. The government should resolve the human rights issues in Balochistan and interact with the indigenous people of that area constructively" (Asghar, 2023).

According to ANI News, an activist said:

"We want the UN to hold Pakistan responsible for Baloch atrocities. The human rights violations in and around Baluchistan

have ground realities that need international attention." - ANI News

Baloch Activist:

The state turns attacks into a pretext to attack and arrest Baloch activists, and protesters. "The practice of abductions followed by disappearances means this is an act that deliberately violates human rights inside Pakistan while seeking to crush our peaceful protests." (International, [2022](#)).

Khan Muhammad Shahwani, a Baloch Activist:

"The achievements we had were mass mobilization for the awareness campaign about Balochistan which included arrests, kidnappings, extra-judicial killings and violence by Pakistanis; rallies, protests demonstrations to our people why Balochistan is its history current state" (Paank, [2024](#)).

According to another activist on World social website:

"The Balochistan protests are against the exploitation of forced disappearances, extrajudicial killings and other state crimes by which we appeal to stop repression in Baluchistan" (Zayar, [2023](#)).

The conflict is of Balochistan autonomy movement which individuals experience deep historical injustice and fight for recognition. Many participants understand the Baloch people have been oppressed for decades, as their struggle is intended at a collective goal of reversion or rebirth in establishing historical redress and rightful place within the state itself. As one of the respondents said:

"People of Balochistan just need reassurance and aiming for harmonious resolution, positive exchange of views they are just demanding for their rights because after facing so much brutality their lost members lead them for this protest which is their right to show their grievances"

Another participant said:

"We Balochis are always neglected by the government and really wanted to be treated equally"

The proponents of the Balochistan autonomy movement regard increased control as a mechanism through which they are putting their community ahead. In spite of their complaints and grievances, the participants in the Balochistan autonomy movement hope for peaceful dialogue with the government is often expressed. It is their conviction that there could be a negotiated peace based on rectification of historical wrongs, cultural and economic rights as well as some shared identity within the multicultural tapestry of Pakistan. In short, the views of participants concerning Balochistan's autonomy movement are based on a number of interwoven historical stories embedded in aspirations for control and power through cultural preservation, and economic justice resistance towards perceived abuses to pursue genuine inclusive governance. Their contribution to the movement symbolizes an effort towards building a future where Baloch people can live with other ethnic groups under the foreground of the Pakistani state.

Challenges for Baloch Autonomy Movement

The Balochistan autonomy movement has several challenges, such as divisions within the group; lack of paramilitary strength and sustainable financial backing. The movement is also weak and splintered, while most Baloch people prefer greater autonomy rather than the more radical stance of secession (Chan, [2019](#)). The struggle has been motivated by historical resentments such as the suppression of the Baloch nationalist movement undertaken by Pakistani security forces, resulting in ethnic and sectarian violence along with a new evolving militant Islamist insurgency (Noor & Ajmal, [2020](#)).

The present situation of the Balochistan autonomy movement seems to be a prevalence wishing for more self-rule by the majority sought as not declaring independence. The demands of the movement have been an increase in revenue as its

province and a referendum on self-determination. Historical issues, such as the oppression of Baloch nationalism in Pakistan by security forces and subsequent ethnic strife within the province have driven this uprising (Ahmar, [2017](#)). According to respondent:

"My views about the people are that they should not be deprived of their legal rights, conflict should be resolved as soon as possible so that it might lead to something prosperous and productive if it won't be resolved it will cause severe challenges not just for a single province but for the entire country"

Another respondent said:

"Balochistan people only want justice and this is the right of everyone to live"

The range of demands tabled by the Baloch nationalist movement has ranged from greater cultural, economic and political rights to autonomy under Pakistan rule or separation entirely with an independent statehood for Balochistan (Kupecz, [2016](#)). This development happened about ten years ago with the emergence of an organized, lethal insurgency and general consolidation of Baloch armed groups especially following the establishment of the BRAS alliance (Kupecz, [2016](#)).

However, the movement is viewed as secular and predominantly leftist Marxism. Despite the increasingly severe repression, the movement continues to engender conversation in wider Pakistani society and enjoys the support of a majority among

Baloch (Grare, [2013](#)). The movement's leaders have asked for a genuine, reliable Baloch government to revive the local control over the province and contain violence as well as represent them in the federal arena. The fate of the movement is still unclear since it struggles with repression coupled with internal disputes and a lack of military power strength and economic funding.

Conclusion

Balochistan autonomy movement is an intricate problem that includes historical injustices, socio-political factors along the role played by state institutions to form and contest over alien ethnic identity. This problem requires a complex analysis that takes into account historical, political and sociocultural aspects. Political anthropology's stance can shed light on how the Baloch people relate to the Pakistani state and how they coexist in a larger socio-cultural landscape. It can also offer new insights into the ways in which power is negotiated and contested with regard to the Balochistan autonomy movement. It is also beneficial to know how the Baloch nationalist movement splits into different separatist groups seeking more autonomy or even independence. This paper adds to the academic debate on political anthropology, ethnic politics and identity construction in the Pakistani context. It is emphasized that a more sensitive approach should be taken into consideration while dealing with challenges faced by the Baloch region.

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