Historical Analysis of the Political Efforts of Pashtun Nationalist Ideals in Balochistan

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ABSTRACT
This study provides a historical analysis of the political efforts of Pashtun nationalist ideals in Balochistan, focusing on the evolution of Pashtun political consciousness, leadership, and institutional engagement. The research aims to pinpoint the political initiatives and strategies employed by Pashtun nationalist actors to assert identity, demand recognition, and participate in governance within a multi-ethnic and politically complex provincial context. Guided by the research question, what are the political efforts of Pashtun nationalist ideals in Balochistan historically and the study employs a qualitative methodology, drawing on document analysis and an extensive review of existing literature. Archival materials, party records, political manifestos, and scholarly publications were analyzed to identify patterns of political mobilization, resistance to centralization, and strategies for democratic participation. Findings indicate that Pashtun nationalism in Balochistan has been shaped by historical memory, leadership legacies, and regional geopolitical pressures, evolving from early debates on Pashtunistan to contemporary rights-based and democratic movements such as the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement. The study highlights the role of leadership, collective activism, and institutional participation in sustaining Pashtun political identity despite structural constraints, militarization, and marginalization. Ultimately, this research underscores the historical trajectory of Pashtun nationalist efforts, revealing a shift from ethno-territorial demands toward political recognition, democratic inclusion, and advocacy for human rights within the Pakistani state.

Keywords: Pashtun Nationalism, Balochistan Politics, Political Identity, Ethnic Mobilization.

1. Introduction

The political history of Balochistan is deeply intertwined with the aspirations, struggles, and ideological evolution of its diverse ethnic communities. Among these communities, the Pashtuns have played a critical role in shaping the political landscape of the province, particularly through the articulation of nationalist ideals. The study titled "Historical Analysis of the Political Efforts of Pashtun Nationalist Ideals in Balochistan" seeks to explore and analyze the political efforts undertaken by Pashtun nationalist actors from a historical perspective, focusing on their contributions to identity formation, political mobilization, and institutional engagement within the multi-ethnic and geopolitically sensitive context of Balochistan. The central research question guiding this study is: "What are the political efforts of Pashtun nationalist ideals in Balochistan historically?" This research aims to pinpoint these efforts, revealing how Pashtun nationalism has evolved in response to historical, political, and socio-cultural dynamics.

Pashtun nationalist politics in Balochistan emerged in the aftermath of the 1947 partition of British India, a period marked by uncertainty, displacement, and political realignment. The partition not only redrew territorial boundaries but also intensified debates over identity, citizenship, and state legitimacy in frontier regions. For Pashtuns residing in Balochistan, the partition catalyzed a process of political awakening influenced by historical memory, cultural identity, and cross-border connections with Pashtun communities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Afghanistan (Qureshi, 1966; Khan, 2022). The contested legitimacy of the Durand Line and Afghanistan's persistent claim over Pashtun territories created a geopolitical backdrop that heightened consciousness about political rights and territorial belonging. Pashtun nationalism, therefore, did not initially manifest as an organized separatist movement but as a gradual evolution of political consciousness through informal debates, cultural expressions, and subaltern political practices (Ahmed, 2020). This early phase laid the foundation for subsequent institutional and ideological developments in Balochistan's Pashtun politics.

The formation of Pashtun identity in Balochistan was profoundly shaped by the province's multi-ethnic context. Unlike the relatively homogeneous Pashtun-majority areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pashtuns in Balochistan coexisted with Baloch, Brahui, and other ethnic groups, each asserting their nationalist and political agendas. This complex environment necessitated nuanced strategies for political engagement. Pashtuns often relied on micro-level participation in local governance, community councils, and political organizations to resist assimilationist policies and preserve their cultural identity (Raisani & Singhaputargun, 2025). Over time, Pashtun identity was reconstructed continuously through interactions with leftist intellectuals, Islamist movements, and emerging professional elites, reflecting a dynamic process that combined traditional social norms with modern political consciousness (Saikal, 2010). This evolution underscores that Pashtun nationalism in Balochistan was both adaptive and responsive to changing political, social, and economic contexts.

A critical dimension of Pashtun nationalist politics is leadership, which has historically shaped political ideology, organizational strategy, and community mobilization. The legacy of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, known as the "Frontier Gandhi," profoundly influenced Pashtun political thought across the region, including Balochistan. Although Ghaffar Khan's direct organizational influence was limited in the province, his philosophy of non-violence, education, and social reform resonated with local Pashtun communities, emphasizing the role of civic engagement and moral leadership in political struggle (Kashif et al., 2024; Khan & Ali, 2015). Pashtun leaders in Balochistan, such as those associated with the National Awami Party (NAP) and later the Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP), institutionalized these ideals by combining ethnic identity with democratic activism, participatory politics, and advocacy for constitutional rights (Rashiduzzaman, 1970; Subhan & Kasi, 2018). Leadership in Pashtun nationalist movements was predominantly collective and community-oriented, allowing movements to survive state repression, navigate complex tribal dynamics, and maintain organizational continuity.

The institutionalization of Pashtun nationalist ideals was further facilitated through political parties, movements, and electoral engagement. Early ideological influences from Afghanistan, such as the Wish Zalmiyan (Awaken Youth Party), inspired constitutionalism, civic activism, and nationalist thought among Pashtun elites (Saikal, 2010). In Pakistan, the Pashtun nationalist agenda initially revolved around the question of Pashtunistan, but gradually evolved toward broader struggles for rights, political representation, and provincial autonomy (Khan, 2022). The NAP played a pivotal role in articulating a leftist and democratic vision for Pashtun nationalism, enduring political repression while maintaining engagement with constitutionalism and participatory politics (Rashiduzzaman, 1970; Subhan & Kasi, 2018). More

recently, movements like the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) have reframed the discourse around human rights, enforced disappearances, and state accountability, reflecting the adaptability of Pashtun nationalism to contemporary political and security challenges (Borthakur, 2021; Iqbal, 2023).

Another significant aspect of Pashtun nationalist politics is resistance to militarization, centralized governance, and authoritarianism. Military operations in Balochistan, although often targeting Baloch insurgents, deeply affected Pashtun communities, reinforcing perceptions of exclusion and injustice (Hussain & Khan, 2014; Mir, 2018). Historical evidence indicates that Pashtun nationalist actors consistently opposed martial law regimes, centralized policies, and judicial complicity in authoritarian governance, framing anti-militarism and constitutionalism as central to their ideology (Haq et al., 2025; Hashmi, 2015). This commitment to civil liberties, legal accountability, and political representation underscores the broader democratic ethos underpinning Pashtun nationalist politics in Balochistan.

Pashtun nationalism also encompasses demands for provincial autonomy, political decentralization, and recognition within the constitutional framework of Pakistan. Political engagement through parties like PkMAP highlights the strategic shift from confrontational politics toward institutionalized participation, emphasizing legislative advocacy, decentralization, and the assertion of ethnic identity through democratic mechanisms (Mittru et al., 2021; Raisani & Singhaputargun, 2025). Despite structural limitations such as weak provincial autonomy, centralized resource allocation, and tribal hierarchies, Pashtun nationalist actors have continuously leveraged electoral politics and legislative platforms to pursue long-term political transformation (Al-Kubaisi et al., 2024).

Regional conflicts and geopolitical dynamics have further shaped Pashtun nationalist politics in Balochistan. The Afghan-Soviet War, the subsequent rise of religious militancy, and the post-9/11 War on Terror created conditions of displacement, securitization, and marginalization for Pashtun communities (Ahmad et al., 2022; Borthakur, 2021; Hassan et al., 2021). In response, contemporary movements like PTM have emphasized rights-based, non-violent approaches, highlighting the evolution of Pashtun nationalism from territorial and ethnic claims toward inclusive, democratic, and rights-centered political strategies (Akhtar, 2021; Malik, 2016).

In sum, the historical analysis of Pashtun nationalist ideals in Balochistan reveals a complex interplay of identity formation, leadership, institutionalization, resistance to authoritarianism, and responses to regional geopolitical pressures. By exploring these political efforts, this study seeks to illuminate the historical trajectories of Pashtun nationalism, its ideological adaptations, and its enduring pursuit of recognition, autonomy, and democratic participation within the multi-ethnic province of Balochistan. The research provides both a historical narrative and a conceptual understanding of the political strategies employed by Pashtun nationalist actors, offering insights into broader processes of ethnic politics and democratic engagement in Pakistan.

2. Material and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the historical political efforts of Pashtun nationalist ideals in Balochistan. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for exploring the complex social, cultural, and political dynamics that shape Pashtun nationalism, allowing for an in-depth understanding of ideologies, leadership, and institutional practices. The study primarily relies on qualitative content and document analysis to interpret historical texts, political manifestos, party records, government reports, and archival materials relevant to Pashtun political activities in Balochistan. This method facilitates the identification of recurring themes, patterns, and ideological trajectories in Pashtun nationalist movements over

time. Additionally, a comprehensive review of existing literature, including scholarly books, journal articles, and research reports, was conducted to contextualize findings within broader academic debates on ethnic politics, nationalism, and provincial governance in Pakistan. Sources were selected based on their relevance to Pashtun political identity, leadership, institutional participation, and resistance strategies in Balochistan. Analytical procedures involved thematic coding and cross-referencing of historical events, political movements, and leadership roles to trace the evolution of Pashtun nationalist ideals. By combining document analysis with an extensive literature review, this study offers a rigorous qualitative examination of Pashtun political efforts in Balochistan, highlighting historical patterns, ideological developments, and contextual factors influencing political mobilization.

3. Results and Discussion

This section analyzes the historical political efforts of Pashtun nationalist ideals in Balochistan through six interrelated themes. The analysis situates Pashtun nationalism within broader postcolonial state formation, regional geopolitics, and internal dynamics of ethnic politics in Pakistan. The discussion directly addresses the research question: What are the political efforts of Pashtun nationalist ideals in Balochistan historically?

3.1. Political Awakening and Identity Formation after Partition

The political awakening of Pashtuns in Balochistan following the partition of British India in 1947 represents a foundational phase in the evolution of Pashtun nationalist consciousness within Pakistan. This awakening did not emerge suddenly or in an organized political form; rather, it developed gradually through historical memory, cultural consciousness, and geopolitical anxieties inherited from the colonial period. Central to this process was the unresolved question of the Durand Line and Afghanistan's refusal to recognize it as an international boundary, which fostered a sense of transborder ethnic solidarity among Pashtuns while simultaneously placing them in a position of political ambiguity within the newly established Pakistani state (Qureshi, 1966; Khan, 2022). These dynamics contributed to an early form of Pashtun political awareness that emphasized identity preservation rather than separatist mobilization.

In contrast to Pashtun regions in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where ethnic mobilization took more organized and institutionalized forms, Pashtuns in Balochistan inhabited a complex multi-ethnic environment dominated politically and symbolically by Baloch nationalism. This provincial context significantly shaped the articulation of Pashtun identity. Rather than engaging in overt confrontation with the state or competing ethnic groups, Pashtun political expression largely unfolded through informal mechanisms such as jirgas, local intellectual debates, poetry, and everyday cultural resistance. These subaltern political practices allowed Pashtuns to assert their distinctiveness while avoiding direct conflict with dominant nationalist narratives (Ahmed, 2020).

The findings further suggest that Pashtun identity formation in Balochistan was neither uniform nor static. Instead, it was continuously reconstructed through interaction with multiple ideological currents, including leftist movements, Islamist groups, and an emerging class of educated professionals. These interactions enabled Pashtun political consciousness to evolve beyond purely ethnic boundaries, incorporating discourses of social justice, religious morality, and modern political participation (Saikal, 2010). This pluralistic engagement contributed to a more nuanced and adaptive form of Pashtun nationalism, responsive to changing political conditions.

The post-9/11 geopolitical environment marked a significant turning point in the political awakening of Pashtuns in Balochistan. The province's transformation into a strategic security

zone heightened state surveillance, militarization, and securitization, profoundly affecting traditional Pashtun social structures, including Pashtunwali. Practices rooted in autonomy, hospitality, and communal justice increasingly came under pressure, leading to the politicization of everyday identity markers (Borthakur, 2021; Dawar, 2019). These developments intensified political awareness among Pashtuns, particularly youth, who increasingly framed their grievances in terms of recognition, dignity, and constitutional rights. Consequently, Pashtun nationalist awakening in Balochistan evolved into a movement seeking political inclusion and equitable representation within the Pakistani state rather than outright secession. This form of nationalism emphasizes democratic participation, cultural recognition, and protection of civil liberties, reflecting a shift from ethnic assertion to rights-based political engagement. In this sense, Pashtun political awakening represents a dynamic process shaped by historical legacies, provincial power structures, and contemporary security dynamics.

3.2. Formation of Pashtun Nationalist Parties and Organized Struggles

The institutionalization of Pashtun nationalist ideals marked a significant transition from informal political consciousness to structured collective action through political parties, ideological platforms, and organized movements. This process enabled Pashtun nationalism to move beyond cultural assertion and enter the formal political arena, where demands for recognition, representation, and rights could be articulated within established political frameworks. Early ideological influences played a crucial role in shaping this transformation, particularly transnational movements that emphasized constitutionalism, political reform, and ethnic self-awareness. Among these, the Wish Zalmiyan (Awaken Youth Party) in Afghanistan emerged as a notable source of intellectual inspiration. Rooted in modernist and nationalist thought, Wish Zalmiyan promoted democratic governance and constitutional rights, ideas that resonated strongly with Pashtun elites across the border in Pakistan and contributed to the diffusion of nationalist discourse in Pashtun-majority regions (Saikal, 2010).

In the Pakistani context, Pashtun nationalism initially revolved around the Pashtunistan question, which centered on the status and political rights of Pashtuns inhabiting the borderlands divided by the Durand Line. This issue served as a rallying point for early nationalist mobilization and reflected broader concerns about territorial identity and ethnic autonomy. However, over time, the focus of Pashtun nationalist politics gradually shifted away from irredentist claims toward constitutional struggles for political rights, provincial autonomy, and equitable representation within the Pakistani state. This transition reflected a pragmatic reassessment of political realities and an increasing recognition that meaningful change could be pursued through democratic participation rather than territorial realignment (Khan, 2022).

The National Awami Party (NAP) played a pivotal role in institutionalizing Pashtun nationalist aspirations by embedding them within a leftist, democratic, and anti-authoritarian framework. As a multi-ethnic political party, NAP provided Pashtun leaders with an organizational platform to articulate ethnic grievances while simultaneously advocating for broader democratic reforms and social justice. Despite repeated repression under military regimes, including bans, arrests, and political exclusion, Pashtun leaders within NAP demonstrated remarkable resilience and sustained political activism. Their continued engagement reflected a deep commitment to democratic principles and a deliberate effort to reconcile ethnic identity with participatory politics and constitutionalism (Rashiduzzaman, 1970; Subhan & Kasi, 2018). Through parliamentary participation, grassroots mobilization, and ideological discourse, NAP contributed to normalizing ethnic politics within the bounds of democratic struggle.

In the contemporary period, the emergence of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) represents a transformative phase in the evolution of Pashtun nationalism. Unlike earlier

nationalist movements that emphasized ethnic autonomy or political representation, PTM reframed Pashtun grievances within the language of human rights, rule of law, and state accountability. By focusing on issues such as enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, landmines, and militarization, PTM articulated a rights-based critique of state practices while grounding its demands in constitutional guarantees. This shift marked a significant departure from traditional nationalist rhetoric and enabled PTM to mobilize a broader constituency, including youth, women, and urban professionals (Borthakur, 2021; Iqbal, 2023).

Moreover, PTM's discourse directly challenged long-standing colonial and postcolonial stereotypes that portrayed Pashtuns as inherently violent, tribal, or resistant to modernity. By emphasizing peaceful protest, civic engagement, and legal accountability, PTM redefined Pashtun political identity as one rooted in democratic values and nonviolent resistance. This evolution underscores the adaptability of Pashtun nationalist ideals and their capacity to respond to changing political contexts, security dynamics, and generational shifts. Overall, the institutionalization of Pashtun nationalism illustrates a continuous process of ideological reformulation, moving from ethnic assertion toward rights-based democratic engagement within the Pakistani state.

3.3. Leadership, Non-Violence, and Democratic Tradition

Leadership has been central to shaping the ideological orientation, strategies, and ethical foundations of Pashtun nationalist politics, particularly through the enduring legacy of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. Although his direct organizational presence in Balochistan was limited compared to his influence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, his philosophy of non-violence, education, and social reform profoundly shaped Pashtun political thought across regional boundaries (Kashif et al., 2024; Khan & Ali, 2015). Ghaffar Khan's articulation of nationalism as a moral and social project, rather than a militant struggle, provided an alternative framework for political mobilization among Pashtuns in peripheral regions such as Balochistan.

Central to Ghaffar Khan's leadership philosophy was the belief that education functioned as a primary instrument of emancipation and political empowerment. In the context of Balochistan—characterized by chronic underdevelopment, limited educational infrastructure, and political marginalization—this emphasis resonated strongly with emerging Pashtun elites and activists (Khan & Ali, 2015). His critique of ignorance, social stagnation, and internal divisions encouraged a reformist outlook that linked political liberation with social transformation. Consequently, Pashtun nationalism in Balochistan developed with a strong normative commitment to non-violence, civic responsibility, and gradual reform rather than immediate confrontation with the state (Kashif et al., 2024).

The institutionalization of these leadership ideals occurred most visibly through the National Awami Party (NAP), which provided a formal political platform for Pashtun nationalist engagement within a democratic and constitutional framework. Pashtun leaders within NAP embedded principles of parliamentary participation, pluralism, and peaceful resistance into nationalist discourse, seeking to reconcile ethnic identity with inclusive democratic politics (Rashiduzzaman, 1970; Saikal, 2010). Figures such as Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan exemplified this synthesis by advocating ethnic rights while simultaneously opposing authoritarianism and supporting cross-ethnic alliances (Khan et al., 2020).

Their leadership was particularly significant in countering centralized state structures that marginalized peripheral ethnic groups. Through constitutional advocacy and political mobilization, NAP leaders challenged military regimes and restrictive governance practices that limited democratic participation (Rashiduzzaman, 1970; Subhan & Kasi, 2018). At the same time, they also sought to reform rigid tribal hierarchies within Pashtun society that constrained

political agency and reinforced elite dominance. By promoting collective decision-making and political education, Pashtun nationalist leaders attempted to democratize internal community structures alongside resisting external political exclusion (Saikal, 2010).

The findings further indicate that Pashtun nationalist leadership in Balochistan was largely collective and community-based rather than centered on charismatic authority. Unlike movements dependent on singular leaders, Pashtun nationalism relied on networks of activists, students, intellectuals, and local organizers who sustained political engagement across changing political contexts (Subhan & Kasi, 2018). This decentralized leadership model enabled the movement to endure repression, party bans, and political marginalization while maintaining ideological continuity.

This collective leadership ethos distinguished Pashtun nationalism from more militant ethno nationalist movements elsewhere in Balochistan, which increasingly adopted armed resistance as a primary strategy. Pashtun leaders, influenced by the legacy of Ghaffar Khan and the democratic traditions of NAP, consistently emphasized non-violent struggle, dialogue, and constitutional engagement (Saikal, 2010; Kashif et al., 2024). As a result, Pashtun nationalist politics in Balochistan evolved as a resilient, adaptive, and normatively grounded movement rooted in democratic leadership and ethical resistance rather than militancy.

3.4. Centralization, Militarization, and Pashtun Resistance

A recurring and dominant theme emerging from the findings is Pashtun resistance to centralized governance, prolonged martial law, and the pervasive militarization of political life in Balochistan. Although military operations in the province were primarily framed as counterinsurgency measures against Baloch nationalist groups, their impact extended deeply into Pashtun-populated areas, producing widespread social disruption, economic dislocation, and heightened insecurity. These interventions reinforced Pashtun perceptions of political exclusion and structural injustice, as communities experienced collective punishment, restrictions on mobility, and erosion of civil liberties (Hussain & Khan, 2014; Mir, 2018). Consequently, militarization became a central reference point in Pashtun nationalist narratives, symbolizing the denial of constitutional rights and democratic participation.

Pashtun nationalist actors consistently positioned themselves in opposition to authoritarian rule and aligned their political struggle with broader democratic movements in Pakistan. Rather than pursuing separatism or armed resistance, Pashtun leaders emphasized constitutionalism, parliamentary politics, and civil rights as legitimate means of addressing ethnic grievances. This alignment reflected a strategic and ideological commitment to democratic norms, enabling Pashtun nationalism in Balochistan to situate itself within nationwide struggles against military dominance and centralized governance (Haq et al., 2025). By framing their demands in universal democratic terms, Pashtun leaders sought both legitimacy and solidarity beyond ethnic boundaries.

The period of the Bhutto government marked a particularly complex phase for Pashtun politics. While the regime espoused populist and democratic rhetoric, its policies of centralization and suppression of leftist political forces significantly constrained political space in Balochistan. The dismissal of the National Awami Party (NAP)–led provincial government and subsequent crackdowns on political dissent disrupted Pashtun political organization and curtailed institutional avenues for expressing ethnic demands (Hashmi, 2015). Despite these constraints, Pashtun leaders continued to resist authoritarian tendencies, carefully navigating a political environment characterized by repression, surveillance, and ideological polarization.

During this period, Pashtun leadership adopted a pragmatic approach that balanced ethnic aspirations with broader national political realities. Rather than escalating confrontation with

the state, Pashtun nationalist actors emphasized negotiation, legal resistance, and political continuity. This strategy reflected an understanding of structural power asymmetries and a desire to preserve organizational survival under adverse conditions (Malik, 2016). By maintaining opposition to excessive state control while avoiding militant escalation, Pashtun leaders reinforced their commitment to constitutional engagement and democratic reform.

Judicial complicity during successive military regimes further intensified Pashtun grievances and reinforced skepticism toward state institutions. Courts often legitimized martial law regimes through doctrines of necessity, undermining the rule of law and weakening safeguards for civil liberties. This institutional failure disproportionately affected peripheral regions such as Balochistan, where arbitrary arrests, prolonged detentions, and denial of due process became normalized practices (Haq et al., 2025). As a result, Pashtun nationalist discourse increasingly incorporated demands for judicial independence, constitutional supremacy, and protection of fundamental rights.

The findings confirm that opposition to militarization and centralized authoritarianism became defining elements of Pashtun nationalist ideology in Balochistan. Anti-militarism was not merely a reaction to security operations but a broader critique of governance structures that marginalized ethnic communities and curtailed democratic participation. Constitutionalism emerged as a parallel ideological pillar, reflecting a sustained commitment to legal-political struggle rather than armed resistance. Together, these elements distinguish Pashtun nationalism from militant ethno nationalist movements in the province and underscore its normative orientation toward democratic resilience, civil liberties, and inclusive statehood.

3.5. Electoral Politics, Provincial Autonomy, and PkMAP

The demand for provincial autonomy constitutes a central and enduring political objective of Pashtun nationalism in Balochistan. Rather than advocating outright separatism, Pashtun nationalist actors have historically framed their struggle around constitutional federalism, decentralization of power, and equitable political representation within the Pakistani state. This orientation reflects a strategic and ideological commitment to reforming the center–province relationship through democratic means. Pashtun participation in electoral politics, particularly through the Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP), illustrates a deliberate shift toward institutional engagement as a means of advancing nationalist goals (Mittru et al., 2021; Raisani & Singhaputargun, 2025).

PkMAP has emerged as the principal political vehicle for articulating Pashtun demands in Balochistan, emphasizing decentralization, recognition of Pashtun cultural and linguistic identity, and adherence to constitutional federalism. Through parliamentary participation, legislative advocacy, and coalition politics, the party has sought to challenge centralized governance structures that marginalize peripheral regions. Its political discourse consistently links Pashtun grievances to broader questions of democratic governance, provincial rights, and constitutional implementation, positioning Pashtun nationalism within a reformist rather than revolutionary framework (Raisani & Singhaputargun, 2025).

An analysis of the 2002 general elections provides important insights into the dynamics of Pashtun political participation under constrained democratic conditions. Conducted in the aftermath of military rule, the elections took place within a highly regulated political environment shaped by institutional engineering, security concerns, and geopolitical pressures. Pashtun electoral engagement during this period was influenced by multiple structural factors, including historical marginalization, entrenched tribal hierarchies, and the strategic importance of Balochistan in regional and international politics following 9/11 (Akhtar, 2011; Din et al.,

2023). These conditions limited the prospects for electoral success while simultaneously intensifying the symbolic significance of participation.

Although Pashtun nationalist parties achieved limited electoral gains, participation itself represented an assertion of political agency and resistance to exclusionary governance. By contesting elections, Pashtun leaders sought to demonstrate commitment to constitutional politics and challenge narratives that portrayed ethnic nationalism as inherently destabilizing. Electoral engagement also provided opportunities to articulate Pashtun concerns within legislative forums, build political alliances, and sustain organizational visibility despite adverse political conditions (Akhtar, 2011).

At the same time, Pashtun nationalist politics continued to face persistent structural constraints. Centralized control over fiscal resources, weak implementation of provincial autonomy provisions, and limited devolution of administrative authority restricted the capacity of elected representatives to effect substantive change. These limitations reinforced perceptions that formal political inclusion did not necessarily translate into meaningful empowerment for peripheral ethnic groups (Al-Kubaisi et al., 2024). Nonetheless, Pashtun nationalist parties largely refrained from disengagement or radicalization, opting instead to maintain a long-term commitment to democratic participation.

This sustained legislative engagement reflects a strategic understanding that institutional politics, despite its limitations, remains essential for gradual political transformation. Pashtun nationalist leaders viewed parliamentary participation not merely as a means of immediate policy influence but as a process of political normalization and legitimacy-building. By operating within constitutional frameworks, they aimed to safeguard political space, cultivate civic awareness, and institutionalize Pashtun demands over time (Al-Kubaisi et al., 2024; Mittru et al., 2021).

Overall, the pursuit of provincial autonomy through electoral and legislative channels underscores the reformist character of Pashtun nationalism in Balochistan. Democratic participation functions both as a strategy of resistance against centralized exclusion and as a vision for an inclusive federal order. Despite electoral setbacks and structural constraints, Pashtun nationalist engagement in institutional politics reflects a resilient commitment to constitutionalism, decentralization, and long-term democratic struggle.

3.6. Geopolitics, Conflict, and Contemporary Realignments

Regional conflicts have profoundly influenced the trajectory of Pashtun nationalist politics in Balochistan, shaping both its strategies and ideological orientations. Historically, Balochistan has occupied a strategic position at the crossroads of regional and international conflicts, making Pashtun communities particularly vulnerable to the consequences of geopolitical turbulence. The Afghan-Soviet War (1979–1989) significantly altered the political landscape, introducing armed militancy, foreign interventions, and ideological contestations that complicated local ethnic politics. Pashtun areas in Balochistan became deeply affected by the inflow of Afghan refugees, the proliferation of radical religious networks, and the politicization of tribal allegiances, generating both opportunities and challenges for Pashtun nationalist mobilization (Ahmad et al., 2022; Borthakur, 2021).

The post-Soviet period exacerbated displacement and marginalization, as cross-border instability disrupted traditional social structures and economic networks. Families were uprooted, livelihoods were destabilized, and educational and institutional development lagged behind due to the combined pressures of conflict and state neglect. These circumstances heightened grievances against the central government, reinforcing a sense of political exclusion while simultaneously providing fertile ground for the emergence of rights-based nationalist

claims (Ahmad et al., 2022). In particular, the experience of being caught between regional wars and central state policies contributed to a reorientation of Pashtun nationalism toward issues of civil liberties, human security, and socio-political inclusion rather than exclusively territorial demands.

The post-2001 War on Terror further intensified the securitization of Pashtun identity. Balochistan's Pashtun populations were often subjected to military operations, surveillance, and systemic suspicion under the premise of counter-terrorism. These measures disrupted traditional communal structures, challenged customary laws such as Pashtunwali, and generated widespread distrust toward state institutions (Hassan et al., 2021). The imposition of security protocols, frequent checkpoints, and monitoring reinforced perceptions of marginalization, compelling Pashtun nationalist actors to reframe their political narratives. In response, activism increasingly adopted non-violent and rights-based frameworks, emphasizing human security, enforced disappearances, and social justice as core political issues (Akhtar, 2021).

The emergence of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) exemplifies this transformation. PTM's mobilization is distinguished by its emphasis on peaceful protest, social media activism, and advocacy for constitutional rights, challenging both historical stigmatization of Pashtuns as inherently militant and the securitized approach of the state. Between 2008 and 2015, broader Pashtun political realignments reflected attempts to reconcile ethnic identity with constitutional citizenship, indicating a conscious shift toward democratic inclusion despite adverse political and security conditions (Malik, 2016).

These developments suggest that Pashtun nationalism in Balochistan has undergone significant ideological maturation. Rather than pursuing outright secession or violent confrontation, contemporary movements articulate a nuanced vision of political recognition, cultural dignity, and participatory governance within the Pakistani state. The trajectory demonstrates a move from historically reactive and territorially framed claims toward proactive, rights-based engagement with state institutions and civil society. This evolution underscores the adaptability of Pashtun nationalist politics in response to regional conflicts, internal displacement, and securitization pressures, highlighting a sophisticated understanding of both political opportunity and structural constraints (Akhtar, 2021; Hassan et al., 2021; Malik, 2016).

Ultimately, regional conflicts have served as both a catalyst and a constraint for Pashtun nationalist politics in Balochistan. While wars, displacement, and militarization generated vulnerabilities, they also fostered political consciousness, organizational innovation, and strategic realignment. The Pashtun nationalist response—anchored in democratic activism, human rights advocacy, and non-violent resistance—reflects an evolved political ethos that seeks to transform marginalization into meaningful representation, making contemporary Pashtun nationalism in Balochistan a compelling example of adaptive, rights-oriented ethnic politics in a conflict-prone region.

4. Conclusions

The study provides a historical analysis of the political efforts of Pashtun nationalist ideals in Balochistan, highlighting the evolution of Pashtun political consciousness and activism within a multi-ethnic and politically complex provincial context. Findings indicate that Pashtun nationalism in Balochistan emerged gradually after the partition of British India, shaped by historical memory, cultural identity, and regional geopolitics, particularly the contested Durand Line and Afghanistan's stance on Pashtun identity. Political awakening and identity formation were mediated through informal debates, cultural practices, and subaltern political engagement rather than organized separatism. Institutionalization of Pashtun nationalist ideals

occurred through political parties and movements, including the Awami National Party (ANP), National Awami Party (NAP) and the Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP), reflecting a shift toward democratic participation and constitutional activism. Leadership played a critical role, emphasizing non-violence, education, and collective community-based strategies that distinguished Pashtun nationalism from militant ethno nationalist movements. The study concludes that Pashtun nationalist political efforts in Balochistan were characterized by resistance to centralization, advocacy for provincial autonomy, and adaptation to regional conflicts, evolving from ethnic territorial claims toward rights-based and democratic engagement. This historical perspective underscores the resilience, adaptability, and participatory ethos of Pashtun nationalism in Balochistan, offering insights into the province's contemporary political dynamics.

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