



ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 04 No. 02. Oct-Dec 2025. Page#4738-4752

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21820136>**Pashtunistan: Myth of Secession or Quest for Ethnic Identity****Muhammad Ajmal Khan**

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muhammad.ajmal@nu.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

The Pashtunistan issue has remained one of the most debated questions in the historiography of Pak-Afghan relations. Existing scholarship has interpreted Pashtunistan as a persistent separatist movement supported by Afghanistan, primarily, while paying insufficient attention to the historical evolution of the concept and its changing political meanings. This article re-examines the origins and transformation of the Pashtunistan issue from the partition of British India to the Bhutto era (1971-1977). Drawing upon archival records, government documents, newspapers, memoirs, and secondary literature, it argues that Pashtunistan initially emerged as a demand for a separate Pashtun state in 1947. This was in response to the limited options offered in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) referendum. However, following Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan's oath of allegiance to Pakistan in 1948, the mainstream Pashtun leadership increasingly redefined Pashtunistan as a constitutional demand for provincial autonomy and the renaming of the North-West Frontier Province within the Pakistani federation. The article further demonstrates that successive Pakistani governments frequently interpreted these constitutional demands through the lens of secessionism, while successive Afghan governments employed the Pashtunistan issue as an instrument of their foreign policy and territorial claims concerning the Durand Line. Although the issue resurfaced during the Bhutto era due to political repression and the activities of a militant faction that sought Afghan support, the mainstream Pashtun leadership remained committed to constitutional and parliamentary politics. The study concludes that Pashtunistan should not be understood as a continuous separatist project but as an evolving political discourse reshaped by constitutional developments, state policies, and the changing dynamics of Pak-Afghan relations.

Keywords: Pashtunistan, Pak-Afghan Relations, Pashtun Ethnic Politics, Provincial Autonomy, NWFP, Ghaffar Khan, Wali Khan, Bhutto Era.

Introduction

The *Pashtunistan* issue emerged during colonial era, when the partition of British India became inevitable. On June 3, 1947, the British government unveiled the Partition Plan, which established the framework for the transfer of power and enabled the people in the designated areas to decide whether to become part of India or Pakistan.¹ The Partition Plan provided for referendums in specific regions of British India, including the NWFP and native regions, to determine whether they would join India or Pakistan. At the same time, the princely states, following the lapse of British paramountcy, were given the option to accede to either India or Pakistan. Although some rulers initially considered remaining independent, they were ultimately expected to decide on accession to one of the two new Dominions.² The decision regarding NWFP would be made through a referendum, allowing it to join one of the new states. On June 5, Dr. Khan Sahib raised the idea of an independent *Pashtunistan* as a third option in the referendum, but the Viceroy rejected it, explaining that Congress had requested

no provinces be offered a third choice.³ Ghaffar Khan asserted that he would never submit to the goals and decisions of any non-Pashtun domination. He informed the stakeholders to include an option of Pathan State to the pre-existing options of India and Pakistan. On the contrary, Lord Mountbatten and Jinnah did not favor an independent state in the Frontiers. Ghaffar Khan, on the other hand, was insecure regarding the rights of the Pashtuns, he was afraid of being swallowed up by the Punjab if he voted for Pakistan rather than demanding an independent state.⁴ He asserted that he would rather go for an independent state (Pathan State) for Pashtuns instead of joining India or Pakistan.⁵ He also appealed to the Congress Working Committee to support their stance over an independent state, but all in vain. Ghaffar Khan boycotted the referendum while the Muslim League managed 99% of the vote in NWFP.⁶ The *Khudai Khidmatgars* mobilized a movement for an independent state under the banner of the *Pashtunistan* movement, which was later transformed into a movement of provincial autonomy and the renaming of NWFP in the post-era of partition.⁷

After the partition in 1947, Ghaffar Khan took the oath of allegiance to Pakistan and redefined the definition of Pashtunistan as an autonomous province and renaming of NWFP to give an identity to the Pashtuns. Despite of allegiance and redefinition of *Pashtunistan*, the Pakistani leadership failed to be friends with Ghaffar Khan and he was detained multiple time on the allegations of *Pashtunistan* state. According to Kennedy, "the *Pashtunistan* means different things to different people, ranging from demand for the formation of a new state incorporating Pathan (Pashtun) areas on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border to a mere change of nomenclature for the NWFP".⁸ This study demonstrates that the *Pashtunistan* question has often been misinterpreted in the historiography of Pakistan and Pak-Afghan relations. Existing scholarship has paid insufficient attention to the historical evolution of the *Pashtunistan* question, particularly its transformation from a demand for an independent Pashtun state to a constitutional struggle for provincial autonomy and ethnic identity within Pakistan. Furthermore, the literature has largely overlooked the extent to which state policies reshaped the trajectory of Pashtun ethnic politics and, at critical junctures, contributed to the revival of the *Pashtunistan* question.

This article traces the evolution of the *Pashtunistan* question from its colonial origins to its revival during the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto era in the early 1970s. It re-examines the prevailing misconceptions and myths surrounding the *Pashtunistan* question and seeks to contribute to the historiography of Pakistan and Pak-Afghan relations by offering a historically grounded interpretation of its evolution. Furthermore, the study examines the transformation of Pashtun ethnic politics from an early demand for a separate state to a constitutional struggle for provincial autonomy, democratic participation, and ethnic recognition within the federal framework of Pakistan.

Historical Origins of the *Pashtunistan* Question

The terms *Pashtunistan* (or *Pakhtunistan*) originated in the colonial era and were derived from the Indian ethnonym *Pathan*, which was commonly used to refer to the Pashtuns. The word 'Pathan' referred to the people who migrated to India from the North-West peripheries of the subcontinent. The suffix *-stan*, derived from Persian, means "land" or "place." When combined with the ethnonym *Pashtun*, it forms the term *Pashtunistan*, literally meaning "the land of the Pashtuns." During the nineteenth century, the term *Pathan* was widely used by the British, Indians, and Afghans to refer to the Pashtun people. However, the political term *Pashtunistan* (or *Pakhtunistan*) emerged only in the twentieth century with the rise of Pashtun nationalist politics. The political connotation of *Pashtunistan* is closely associated with the demarcation of the Durand Line⁹ in 1893, which divided the Pashtun population between British India and

Afghanistan. The demarcation of the Durand Line sparked sentiments in Pashtuns quest for identity. Therefore, the Durand Line gave them opportunity to resist the British imperialism. In 1897, a widespread Pashtun uprising erupted against British rule, driven in part by growing resentment over the Durand Line and British frontier policies.¹⁰ The uprising was driven by a combination of economic, religious, and ethnic grievances in the NWFP (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). In 1901, Lord Curzon separated the North-West Frontier from the Punjab and established it as a separate administrative province, known as the NWFP.¹¹ To contain the Pashtun uprisings, the British established local militias to maintain order along the frontier. However, the outbreak of the First World War provided the Pashtun tribes with an opportunity to mobilize and intensify their resistance to British colonial rule.¹² It is pertinent to note that the tribal chiefs, Malak, religious figures, and social activists all united against British imperialism. Khan Ghaffar Khan, a prominent social and religious reformer, led the Pashtuns in resisting British colonial rule through the principles of non-violence and established the *Khudai Khidmatgar* (Servants of God) in 1929.¹³

This discourse of *Khudai Khidmatgar* emphasized patriotism, social progress, religious reform, resistance to British colonial rule, cultural affinity with Afghanistan, and the pursuit of freedom. It also fostered the widespread use of nationalist terminology, including *Pashtun Qaum*, *Qaumiyat*, *Qaumi Taleem*, and *Azadi*, which reflected the emergence of a distinct Pashtun nationalist consciousness and a growing body of nationalist literature. This intellectual and political awakening was described by Olaf Caroe as the "Pathan Renaissance."¹⁴ It was a time when the Pashtuns were seeking their identity and unity in the region through the philosophy of non-violence. Aubrey Metcalfe, the Foreign Secretary and a member of the Executive Council, portrayed Ghaffar Khan as being motivated by strong anti-British sentiments and a deep commitment to the Pashtun cause. According to Metcalfe, Ghaffar Khan sought to overthrow British rule and establish a Pashtun principality in the NWFP, one that would be more closely aligned with Afghanistan than with India.¹⁵ It is important to note that during Ghaffar Khan's struggle, the British authorities propagated the perception that he was campaigning for "Pathanistan" which later became *Pashtunistan*.

Initially, Ghaffar Khan's movement focused on social and religious reform within Pashtun society before evolving into a campaign of non-violent resistance against British colonial rule. As the partition of British India became imminent, he opposed the partition plan. When Partition proved unavoidable, he advocated a separate homeland for the Pashtuns, known as *Pashtunistan*.¹⁶ Subsequently, Afghanistan also advanced the Durand Line issue and claimed its territories. According to Sardar Najeebullah Khan's, as an Envoy Extraordinary and Special representative of King Zahir Shah, broadcast, the Afghan government requested the British government before the partition of United India (1932-34) that the territories inhabited by the trans-border Afghans should not be considered a part of India.¹⁷ However, the reply was not encouraging because of the severe conflict between Hindus and Muslims in the United India.

It is reported that one of the *Pashtunistan* movement protagonists, Haji Muhammad Amin, received money from Afghanistan to run the movement. To confirm Afghanistan's role more accurately in this regard, in 1946, Abdul Ghafar Khan was also invited by the Minister of the Afghan National Economy, Abdul Majeed Khan. He offered economic support to run the *Pashtunistan* movement, but Ghafar Khan understood his intentions very early. Majeed Khan wanted to use Afghan money to run the movement, but his intention was not to merge NWFP and the tribal areas in Afghanistan, however, rather to overthrow the then-royal dynasty and become the president of the Afghan republic.¹⁸ It is pertinent to understand that Afghan

government support for *Pashtunistan* was not the Pashtun cause in Pakistan rather their own interest to claim their territories of Durand Line.

On June 3, 1947, the British parliament endorsed the partition plan to decide the future of United India. To facilitate the transfer of power, the British government announced the June 3 Plan in 1947. Under the plan, referendums were to be held in designated areas to determine whether they would join India or Pakistan. The princely states, meanwhile, were given three options: to accede to India, accede to Pakistan, or remain independent until deciding their future.¹⁹ Under the 3 June Plan, the political future of the NWFP was to be decided through a referendum offering a choice between India and Pakistan. In protest, the Afghan government convened conferences in Kabul on 9 June 1947 and called upon the British government to include a third option, allowing the people of the NWFP either to establish an independent state or to accede to another government.²⁰ Again, the British government did not encourage the option of an independent state. The Afghan government meant the following options should be consulted for the NWFP at the time of the referendum;

1. Formation of an Independent State (*Pashtunistan*)
2. Accession to Pakistan (The Muslim State)
3. Accession to India (The Hindu-dominated State)
4. Accession to Afghanistan (To restore the Durand Line)²¹

Ghaffar Khan was not in favor of the bifurcation of United India as the Congress did, which was perceived as if he was against the creation of Pakistan. Eventually, the Congress voted in favor of partition and held a meeting without consulting Ghaffar Khan and the provincial leadership.²² Ghaffar Khan was upset with the Congress' attitude. Later on, Ghaffar Khan spoke to the Congress committee that the Congress' vote for the partition was not an appreciated decision and asked the committee if they left the *Khudai Khidmatgar* with no suitable option. He stated to the committee that 'es. 'We Pakhtuns stood by you and had undergone great sacrifices for attaining freedom', complained Ghaffar Khan 'but you have now deserted us and thrown us to the wolves'.²³ Ghaffar Khan asked Mahatma Gandhi that he and his key workers did not favor a referendum as it would lead to violence. He further asserted that he would favor an independent Pathan state within India.²⁴ Due to a lack of support from the Congress side, multiple meetings took place between the provincial assembly and the *Khudai Khidmatgars* commanders to reach an understanding between the Muslim League and the Congress-*Khudai Khidmatgar*. Consequently, a meeting was held between Ghaffar Khan and Muhammad Ali Jinnah on June 18, in New Delhi. Ghaffar Khan informed Muhammad Ali Jinnah that the *Khudai Khidmatgars* were prepared to accept and cooperate with Pakistan, provided that the following conditions were met: (a) Autonomous province; (b) The right of the province to secede from Pakistan if so desired; and (c) The incorporation into the NWFP of contiguous Pashtun-inhabited territories. Muhammad Ali Jinnah asked Ghaffar Khan to join Pakistan first and these matters would be decided with mutual understanding. Ghaffar Khan responded that he would consult his party members and would respond him accordingly.²⁵

The decision to hold a referendum in NWFP to determine the future of the Frontier led to a serious situation for both the region in general and the *Khudai Khidmatgar* in particular. The *Khudai Khidmatgar* were worried about the Frontier's future because of their association with the Congress. In such a scenario, a meeting of provincial Jirgah, Frontier Congress, *Zalmay Pakhtun*, and the officers of *Khudai Khidmatgar* was held on June 21, 1947 at Banu (Banu Resolution). The meeting, chaired by Khan Amir Muhammad Khan, unanimously concluded that an independent government should be established in the province to prevent adverse circumstances from affecting the people of the Frontier.²⁶ Speaking at Banu, Ghaffar Khan

asserted that the British intended to impose Pakistan on the NWFP against the will of the Pashtuns in order to retain strategic military bases and airfields as a safeguard against Soviet expansion.²⁷ Sultan i Rome believes that the efforts that the Khudai Khidmatgars and others made to unite the Frontier people for the Pashtun cause reflected the idea of self-government rather than an independent Pashtun state. Rome justified his argument with the following poster:

پښتنو د خپل آزاد حکومت پرېکړه وکړه
پښتانه نه هندوستان غواړي، نه پاکستان

Transliteration:

Pashtuns have decided in favor of an independent government of their own

*Pashtuns neither want India nor Pakistan*²⁸

On July 6, the start of the referendum was marked by “*Pashtunistan Day*” in Peshawar, where large crowds of *Khudai Khidmatgar* supporters gathered to protest.²⁹ Subsequently, the referendum took place without any violence, and the results, announced on July 20, showed that of 572,798 registered voters in the Frontier settled districts, 289,244 voted for Pakistan and 2,874 for Hindustan.³⁰ Consequently, the referendum result decided the future of the NWFP. Furthermore, the partition date was announced as August 14, and it decided the fate of the NWFP.

Afghanistan's Policy During Partition

Historically, Pak-Afghan relations have been traced back to three major events: The Treaty of Gandamak in 1879, the Treaty of Durand Line in 1893, which the government of British India signed with the Afghan Emir Abd al-Rehman, and the Anglo-Afghan pact in 1905, which created problems for both countries.³¹ The historical treaties sparked tension when Pakistan became an independent state on August 14, 1947. During the partition of British India in 1947, the Afghan government advanced three principal demands: the abolition of the Durand Line, the incorporation of the Pashtun tribal areas, and the establishment of an independent state of *Pashtunistan*. Failing to fulfill its demands, Afghanistan opposed Pakistan's membership in the United Nations in September 1947.³² Ironically, Afghanistan was the only country that opposed the recognition of Pakistan at the UN forum. Kabul argued that Pakistan should not be recognized before the ‘*Pashtunistan*’ issue was resolved and also claimed the territorial boundary (Durand Line) occupied by Pakistan.³³ Nawabzada Saidullah Khan, Jinnah's personal envoy, met former Afghan Prime Minister Sardar Hashim Khan, who denied knowledge of the vote, citing a miscommunication. Hashim Khan contacted Afghanistan's Foreign Minister, repudiated their representative, and ordered the withdrawal of the vote. Subsequently, Afghanistan reversed its earlier position and welcomed Pakistan's admission to the United Nations.³⁴ Unlike more assertive elements within the Afghan leadership, King Zahir Shah preferred to preserve constructive relations with the newly established state. Consequently, Pakistan and Afghanistan established diplomatic relations in 1948. However, Afghanistan's earlier stance at the United Nations had already strained bilateral relations and cast a shadow over the development of cordial ties between the two countries.

Sardar Najeebullah discussed the *Pashtunistan* issue with Pakistani officials and assured them that the Afghan government remained deeply concerned about the welfare of the Pashtun brethren living on the Pakistani side of the border. He urged the Government of Pakistan to rename the NWFP as *Afghania* or *Pashtunistan*, arguing that such a change would recognize and reinforce the distinct ethnic and territorial identity of the Pashtuns in Pakistan.³⁵ On February 7, 1949, during talks in Karachi with Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Ambassador to

Afghanistan, and Foreign Secretary, Sardar Najibullah hinted at reviving the *Pashtunistan* campaign if Pakistan rejected Afghanistan's proposal to rename the NWFP.³⁶

Furthermore, King Zahir Shah discouraged tribal elders from promoting the perception that Afghanistan sought to create difficulties for Pakistan. The Afghan government advised them to refrain from confronting the Pakistani government and to await the outcome of bilateral negotiations, emphasizing its desire to maintain amicable relations with Pakistan.³⁷ The Afghan government was waiting for fresh development from Pakistani side. Subsequently, the Afghan government revived the *Pashtunistan* campaign following Pakistan's airstrike on Mughalgai village in Afghanistan, which reportedly killed fifteen Afghan nationals and injured twelve others.³⁸ The Afghan government, in response, carried out rallies in tribal areas to revive the *Pashtunistan* question. Later on, On March 9, 1963, Daoud resigned, and a new cabinet was formed with a prime minister outside the Royal family for the first time. After talks in Tehran, Pakistan and Afghanistan agreed on May 28, 1963, to restore diplomatic, consular, and commercial relations. From 1963 to 1973, relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan remained stable. Even during the 1965 war, Afghanistan refrained from intervening and generally sympathized with Pakistan, despite the long-standing *Pashtunistan* dispute.

It is important to note that support for the *Pashtunistan* issue was not uniform within the Afghan government. While some officials favored a cautious approach, figures such as Sardar Daud repeatedly sought to exploit the issue for political purposes. Sardar Daoud's strong support for *Pashtunistan* worried King Zahir Shah, who felt that prioritizing the issue had harmed Afghanistan without achieving its goals. Concerned about Pak-Afghan relations, Zahir Shah asked Daoud to resign as Prime Minister, hoping his departure would help normalize ties with Pakistan, amid disagreements over the pace and nature of political reforms.³⁹ From 1947 to 1970, the *Pashtunistan* question remained a relatively minor issue in Pak-Afghan relations. However, after Sardar Daud assumed the Afghan presidency in 1973, he revived the issue, capitalizing on the discontent generated by Bhutto's repressive policies toward Pashtuns in Pakistan.

The Evolution of the *Pashtunistan* Movement

Pakistan emerged as an independent state on August 14, 1947, with the NWFP becoming one of its constituent provinces. To avoid an unavoidable circumstance, Dr. Khan Sahib did not attend the flag-hoisting ceremony in Peshawar. Their absence was interpreted by the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) as a deliberate act of defiance and was criticized as an insult to the newly established state.⁴⁰ The ideological difference between *Khudai Khidmatgars* and the Pakistan Muslim League led to dismissal of the Dr. Khan Sahib's ministry after the flag hoisting ceremony. Subsequently, Abdul Qayum Khan of PML was entrusted to form government in NWFP.⁴¹ Although before the dismissal of his ministry, on August 13, 1947, Dr. Khan Sahib met Sir George Cunningham, the newly appointed Governor of the NWFP, and assured him that he would neither declare *Pashtunistan* nor undertake any action that would jeopardize the newly established Pakistani state.⁴²

Contrary to official allegations, Ghaffar Khan did not seek to undermine the newly established state of Pakistan. To reaffirm this position, the *Khudai Khidmatgars* convened a meeting at their headquarters in Sardaryab (Charsadda) on September 3-4, 1947, where they adopted a resolution recognizing Pakistan as their homeland and pledging to safeguard its interests. Furthermore, the dismissal of Dr. Khan's ministry and the subsequent formation of Qayyum Khan's ministry also drew widespread criticism, it emphasized that the movement would refrain from any action that might undermine the stability of either the provincial or the central government. The *Khudai Khidmatgars* also formally detached their ties with the Indian National

Congress and changed its flag from tri-color to the Red Flag as the symbol of their organization.⁴³

To support the cause of Pakistan and be a part of Pakistan, Ghaffar Khan went to Karachi to attend the first session of the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan on 28 February 1948. During the session, he took the oath of allegiance to Pakistan and delivered a speech affirming his commitment to the constitutional framework of the newly established state. He addressed the session:

I confess that I was against the division of India. It was my selfless opinion that India should not be divided. But now, when it has occurred, our differences and disputes have also vanished. Now all the energies of my friends and mine will only be devoted to the service of our country. I want to make it clear to everyone that we want Pakistan to be a truly perfect Islamic state.⁴⁴

Despite his allegiance to Pakistan, Ghaffar Khan believed that Pakistan's creation stemmed from British "divide and rule" policies rather than representing the true will of the Muslim masses, as claimed by the Muslim League.⁴⁵ He believed India's problems could best be solved through a socialist republic with maximum provincial autonomy, including the right to secede. He feared Pakistan would result in non-Pashtun domination over the Pashtuns and declared in 1947:

After our eighteen years of struggle for freedom, we are now faced with a new danger [i.e., Pakistani domination]. Not only the liberty of the Pashtuns, but our very existence is at stake. I, therefore, call upon all Pathans who have love of their motherland at heart to unite and work... to achieve the cherished goal of *Pashtunistan*.⁴⁶

It is important to note that after partition, Ghaffar Khan redefined the *Pashtunistan* cause after taking the oath of allegiance to Pakistan. Furthermore, his idea of *Pashtunistan* referred to provincial autonomy, not a separate state. On March 5, 1948, while addressing the *Pashtunistan* cause to the constituent assembly, Feroz Khan Noon interrupted Ghaffar Khan, saying, "and you will join Afghanistan." Ghaffar Khan replied that "we can only join you and not Afghanistan. You have a greater claim on us than Afghanistan." Ghaffar further argued that, like Sindh, Punjab, and Bengal, the NWP should bear a name reflecting the identity of its indigenous people. Maintaining that Pashtun was the authentic ethnonym, he advocated renaming the province *Pashtunistan* to symbolize the unity and collective identity of the Pashtuns living in Pakistan.⁴⁷

After returning from the oath-taking ceremony, Ghaffar Khan declared his loyalty to Pakistan, but not to the Muslim League.⁴⁸ He formed the Pakistan Peoples Party to seek provincial autonomy for all the ethnicities. At a public meeting in Mardan in early April 1948, he criticized the provincial government for interfering in their activities and, referring to *Pashtunistan*, questioned the place of Pashtuns in Pakistan, noting that Bengal belonged to Bengalis, Sindh to Sindhis, and Punjab to Punjabis. The same month, Jinnah met Ghaffar Khan in Peshawar and urged him to dissolve the *Khudai Khidmatgar* and to join the Muslim League. Ghaffar Khan refused the dissolution of *Khudai Khidmatgar* and assured Jinnah that he had consulted his party; the *Khudai Khidmatgar* would provide full support to Pakistan and would not create any obstacles to the country's progress.⁴⁹ After the Peshawar meeting, Jinnah accused the Red Shirts of seeking to join Afghanistan. Still, Ghaffar Khan denied the claim, declaring his loyalty to Pakistan and stating that Pakistan had a greater claim over the Frontier than Afghanistan. In addition, Qazi Attaullah also clarified that the *Khudai Khidmatgars* sought provincial autonomy, not separation from Pakistan. Observing the ideological differences between the *Khudai Khidmatgars* and the Muslim League, it was clear that the League viewed the *Khudai*

Khidmatgars as allies of the Congress and suspected them of wanting to undermine Pakistan, leading to repeated allegations against them.

To unite the Pashtuns, Ghaffar Khan toured the tribal areas to mobilize the Pashtuns around their ethnic and political rights, particularly the demand for provincial autonomy. In response, the Qayyum Khan government arrested Ghaffar Khan and Wali Khan, accusing them of collaborating with Afghanistan and alleging that their advocacy of *Pashtunistan* was aimed at facilitating the region's merger with Afghanistan. Following the Babra massacre on August 12, 1948, the Qayyum ministry declared the *Khudai Khidmatgar* and the Pashtun Zalmi organizations unlawful under the NWFP Public Safety Ordinance No. 7 of 1948, and their property, including the Sardaryab Markaz and its lands, was confiscated.⁵⁰

The state elite sought to establish Pakistan as a centralized state founded on religious ideology, an approach opposed by Ghaffar Khan. He instead advocated a socialist federal system with strong provincial autonomy, arguing that cultural identities should coexist with religion. The state, however, branded him a traitor and interpreted his demands for autonomy as a veiled call for secession.⁵¹ In the NWFP, religion was frequently employed to counter Pashtun ethnic nationalism. During his 1951 visit to Pakistan, including the tribal areas, Grand Mufti Amin al-Husseini declared Pakistan a *Dar al-Islam* and urged Pashtuns to prioritize Islamic unity over ethnic identity, calling for support for Muslim causes such as Kashmir, Morocco, and Algeria while discouraging ethnic and linguistic divisions.⁵² However, under the leadership of Ghaffar Khan, the Pashtuns continued to emphasize their ethnic cause. Pashtun resistance intensified when the state introduced the One-Unit Scheme formula in 1955, which merged provinces of West Pakistan into one administrative unit. This move was opposed by the ethnic leaders of Pashtun, Sindhi, and Baloch.

The One-Unit Scheme generated widespread apprehension among the Pashtuns, Sindhis, and Baloch, who feared that it would facilitate Punjabi political and administrative dominance at the expense of the smaller ethnic groups. Consequently, the scheme was strongly opposed by the leadership of these ethnic communities.⁵³ Opposition to the One-Unit Scheme spread across both wings of Pakistan, with protests, rallies, and public meetings organized in Karachi, Hyderabad, and Peshawar in West Pakistan, as well as in Dhaka and Chittagong in East Pakistan.⁵⁴ Between 1955 and 1963, Ghaffar Khan campaigned for the dissolution of the One-Unit Scheme and the restoration of provincial autonomy. In 1963, however, the Ayub Khan government detained him along with several other ethnic political leaders. Following his release in 1966, Ghaffar Khan went into self-imposed exile in Afghanistan, where he remained till 1972.

Following Ghaffar Khan's imprisonment and subsequent exile, his son, Khan Abdul Wali Khan, assumed leadership of the movement for the dissolution of the One-Unit Scheme and the restoration of provincial autonomy. Like his father, Wali Khan maintained that *Pashtunistan* referred to an autonomous Pashtun province within the Pakistani federation rather than an independent sovereign state. Wali Khan also questioned Afghanistan's position on the *Pashtunistan* issue, arguing that Kabul Radio was exploiting the Pashtun cause in Pakistan for political purposes. With the dissolution of the One-Unit Scheme, the provincial status of Punjab, the NWFP, and Sindh was restored, while Balochistan was granted full provincial status.

From Ethnic Identity to Constitutional Politics

From its inception in 1947 until 1971, Pakistan faced a series of political and constitutional challenges, including the ethnic groups' quest for identity, recurring constitutional crises, the military takeover, and the enforcement of the One-Unit Scheme. These unresolved issues deepened regional grievances and ultimately contributed to the traumatic separation of East

Pakistan in 1971. After the separation, the issue of regional autonomy became highly contentious. At various stages, the political discourse of Pakistan's ethnic groups was misperceived by the state elite.⁵⁵ According to Rasul Bakhsh Rais, Islamist and mainstream political parties consistently misrepresented the demands of the country's four major nationalities, Punjabis, Sindhis, Pashtuns, and Baloch.⁵⁶ The secession of East Pakistan raised concerns that the remaining ethnic groups in Pakistan might pursue similar demands for greater autonomy or separation. However, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's power-sharing arrangement, together with the formation of coalition governments in the NWFP and Balochistan, helped alleviate these concerns and integrate ethnic political forces into the constitutional framework. A significant transformation occurred in Pashtun ethnic politics during this period, as the demand for Pashtun ethnic identity and the *Pashtunistan* issue gradually gave way to constitutional and electoral politics. The National Awami Party (NAP) emerged as the strongest advocate of ethnic identity and provincial autonomy in Pakistan. However, these demands conflicted with Bhutto's vision of a strong centralized state, resulting in a significant divide between the central government and regional ethno-nationalist groups. NAP participated in the 1970 elections and came out as the major party in the Pashtun-dominated areas. Despite ideological differences with JUI, the NAP formed a coalition government in NWFP and Balochistan. Although the NAP pledged its cooperation with the federal government, relations soon deteriorated as Bhutto's centralized approach to governance resulted in frequent intervention in the affairs of the provincial governments through political allies such as Abdul Qayyum Khan in the NWFP and Sardar Akbar Bugti and Samad Khan Achakzai in Balochistan.⁵⁷ Bhutto's intervention in provincial affairs culminated in the dismissal of the Balochistan provincial government in 1973, which was followed by the resignation of the NAP-JUI coalition government in the NWFP in protest.⁵⁸

Following the dismissal of the Balochistan provincial government and Bhutto's increasingly repressive policies, Wali Khan sought to mobilize opposition forces by forming the United Democratic Front (UDF) in alliance with other opposition parties. The alliance organized public rallies to protest Bhutto's centralized and authoritarian style of governance. One such gathering, held at Liaquat Bagh, Rawalpindi, was attacked by hooligans of the PPP and members of the Federal Security Force (FSF). The violence resulted in the deaths of eleven National Awami Party workers and left many others injured. According to contemporary accounts, the attack was intended to target Wali Khan, who narrowly escaped with the assistance of party workers. The incident deepened divisions within the NAP and prompted a faction of its members, led by the party's General Secretary, Ajmal Khattak, to seek refuge in Afghanistan. From there, the group attempted to exert pressure on the Bhutto government by reviving the *Pashtunistan* issue. It is important to note, however, that this faction did not represent the official position of the NAP, as a significant section of the party leadership neither endorsed the move to Afghanistan nor supported the revival of the *Pashtunistan* campaign.

Revival of the *Pashtunistan* Issue

A key argument of this study is that the evolution of Pashtun ethnic politics has been driven primarily by regime policies and constitutional developments. During the Bhutto era, the revival of the *Pashtunistan* issue was largely a reaction to the federal government's repressive measures rather than the result of an inherent separatist ideology among the Pashtun leadership. After returning to Pakistan following eight years of self-imposed exile in Afghanistan, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan sought to cooperate with the Bhutto government in the interest of national reconciliation. Bhutto, however, rejected the proposal, reportedly remarking that he did not require Ghaffar Khan's support.⁵⁹ The Pashtuns did not welcome

Bhutto's gesture in NWFP, and Ghaffar Khan stated that "This is the Pakistan of Bhutto where there is no place for Pashtun and Baloch grievances."⁶⁰ The Bhutto government, however, accused certain NAP activists, particularly Ajmal Khattak, of seeking to establish an independent *Pashtunistan* in the north-western region bordering Afghanistan. Abdul Qayyum Khan, the Interior Minister, alleged that Khattak, while in exile in Afghanistan, intended to announce *Pashtunistan's* independence from Kabul. He further alleged that large quantities of arms were being smuggled into Pakistan to foment unrest and destabilize the country. Bhutto also accused Wali Khan of being the principal architect of the *Pashtunistan* movement, contending that he was promoting the concept of Pakistan's four nationalities. In response to Bhutto, Wali Khan declared that:

The NAP believes there is one nation in this country and that is...The Pakistani nation is composed of nationalities that have their own distinct language and cultures. There is no contradiction between the two. Still, these nationalities are like flowers with their particular color and fragrances, in a bouquet manifesting their unity in diversity.⁶¹

As tensions between the federal government and the NAP intensified, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto sought to curtail the party's political influence and neutralize the *Pashtunistan* issue. During this period, Wali Khan reportedly survived several assassination attempts, while numerous NAP leaders and workers were arrested or killed as part of the government's campaign against the party. The confrontation reached a critical turning point when Hayat Muhammad Khan Sherpao, Governor of the NWFP and a prominent PPP leader, was assassinated in a bomb explosion at the University of Peshawar in February 1975. The incident provided the Bhutto government with the immediate justification to intensify its crackdown on the NAP and Wali Khan.⁶² Sherpao's assassination provided the Bhutto government with a pretext to intensify its crackdown on Wali Khan and the NAP.⁶³ Accordingly, on 10 February 1975, Bhutto banned the NAP through an executive order and ordered the arrest of its leadership. The party leaders were accused of involvement in the assassination of Hayat Muhammad Khan Sherpao and charged with anti-state and terrorist activities.⁶⁴ Wali Khan, along with Ghaus Bakhsh Bizenjo, Khair Bakhsh Marri, Amirzada Khan, Mir Gul Khan Naseer, Habib Jalib, Kaswar Gardezi, Attaullah Mengal, Amanullah Kasi, Asfandiar Wali Khan, Sher Muhammad Marri, and several other NAP leaders and activists, was arrested on charges of sedition, secessionism, and anti-state activities. Bhutto declared them 'secessionists' and alleged that they were working against the country's integrity.⁶⁵ Wali Khan and the NAP were later released after General Zia-ul-Haq's military takeover in 1977 and declared the charges against NAP leaders as null and void.

The *Pashtunistan* Question: A Misunderstood Political Discourse

The *Pashtunistan* issue is among the most misperceived subjects in the historiography of Pashtun ethnic politics. The existing literature pays insufficient attention to the historical evolution of the *Pashtunistan* concept, particularly its transformation from the colonial-era term *Pathanistan* to *Pashtunistan*, and subsequently from a demand associated with a separate state to one centered on provincial autonomy and the renaming of the NWFP. It is frequently portrayed as a consistent separatist movement led by the *Khudai Khidmatgar* and Ghaffar Khan. This interpretation overlooks the significant transformation of the *Pashtunistan* discourse after Ghaffar Khan's oath of allegiance to Pakistan in 1948, when the mainstream Pashtun leadership increasingly redefined *Pashtunistan* as a demand for provincial autonomy rather than an independent state. The Pakistani leadership failed to be friends with Ghaffar Khan, as they perceived him as a pro-Congress man and still working to dismember Pakistan.⁶⁶ Ghaffar Khan's commitment to provincial autonomy within the federal framework of Pakistan cannot be overlooked. Despite repeated repression, the persecution of Pashtun activists, his frequent

imprisonment, and following the enforcement of the One-Unit Scheme, he continued to advocate the demand of provincial autonomy and the dismantling of One Unit through constitutional and non-violent means. He consistently clarified that by *Pashtunistan* he meant an autonomous Pashtun province within Pakistan and the renaming of the NWFP, rather than an independent state.

Successive Pakistani governments frequently interpreted the Pashtun demand for provincial autonomy and the renaming of the NWFP as a separatist agenda pursued under the banner of *Pashtunistan*. On the contrary, Afghanistan also exploited the Pashtun cause in Pakistan when the Afghan government opposed Pakistan's membership in the UN in 1947 by claiming the Durand Line territories and the resolution of the *Pashtunistan* issue.⁶⁷ Although the Afghan government recognized Pakistan as an independent state later, but its gesture damaged the relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. King Zahir Shah generally sought to maintain cordial relations with Pakistan. However, political figures such as Daud Khan used the *Pashtunistan* issue to advance their domestic and strategic political objectives. Sardar Daud, President of Afghanistan, was a strong supporter of the *Pashtunistan* movement. When he assumed power as the President of Afghanistan in 1973, he declared Pakistan the only neighboring country with which Afghanistan had a political dispute to settle, i.e., the resolution of *Pashtunistan* issue and the recognition of the Durand Line.⁶⁸ It is pertinent to note that Sardar Mohammad Daoud Khan not only extended support to the militant faction advocating *Pashtunistan* but also provided sanctuary and assistance to Baloch guerrilla groups, using both movements to exert pressure on the Bhutto government. To counter the Bhutto regime, Sardar Daud reportedly spent approximately \$875,000 annually on the *Pashtunistan* campaign and on the Baloch guerrillas.⁶⁹ King Zahir Shah was reportedly concerned that Sardar Daud Khan's handling of the *Pashtunistan* issue could undermine Afghanistan's relations with Pakistan. Ghaffar Khan had already declared that Sardar Daud was exploiting the *Pashtunistan* issue for his own interests. He stated that:

Our demand for *Pashtunistan* has been fulfilled. We have the *Pashtunistan* we desire. But some elements in Afghanistan and Pakistan do not like this situation.⁷⁰

The NAP's participation in the 1970 general elections and the subsequent formation of coalition governments with the JUI in the provinces marked a significant transformation in Pashtun ethnic politics, demonstrating the party's commitment to constitutional politics within the federal framework of Pakistan. After the abolition of One Unit, Wali Khan confidently assured that "We have left the *Pashtunistan* issue and we are not even thinking of renaming the NWFP as *Pashtunistan* because it is no longer an issue for the NAP."⁷¹ From this perspective, the foregoing discussion indicates that Pashtun ethnic politics has frequently been misperceived by successive regimes, which have often portrayed its constitutional demands as secessionist. Bhutto's quest for one-party rule in Pakistan and his authoritarian nature revived the *Pashtunistan* issue and allowed Bhutto to ban the NAP and imprison the NAP leadership.

After the assassination of Bhutto in 1977, General Zia-ul-Haq released the political prisoners and dismissed the alleged charges against NAP leadership. He also referred Ghaffar Khan and Wali Khan as "patriotic Pakistanis."⁷² Furthermore, the government granted a general amnesty to those who had participated in the Baloch insurgency between 1973 and 1977 and introduced compensation measures to address the losses they had incurred.⁷³ Zia-ul-Haq withdrew the high treason cases that had been instituted against opposition leaders during the Bhutto government. He maintained that approximately 99 percent of these cases had been politically motivated and lacked genuine legal merit.⁷⁴ To gain the support of Wali Khan and Ghaffar Khan, Zia-ul-Haq personally met Ghaffar Khan and expressed his willingness to rename

the North-West Frontier Province to any title other than “*Pashtunistan*,” a term that remained controversial due to its association with a separatist movement.⁷⁵ However, Ghaffar Khan denied any other name other than *Pashtunistan*.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the *Pashtunistan* issue evolved significantly over time and cannot be understood solely through the lens of separatism. The 3rd June Plan laid the foundation for the *Pashtunistan* issue when a referendum was planned to for NWFP to join India and Pakistan. During the referendum in the NWFP, the Pashtun leadership rejected the choice between joining India or Pakistan and instead advocated a third option, the establishment of a separate Pashtun state. Although the mainstream Pashtun leadership did not seek the merger of NWFP with Afghanistan. However, the Afghan leadership used the *Pashtunistan* issue to reinforce its claim over the Durand Line along with the Pashtun tribal territories in Pakistan, making it an instrument of its foreign policy toward Pakistan. Following his oath of allegiance to Pakistan in 1948, Ghaffar Khan abandoned the demand for an independent Pashtun state and instead pursued provincial autonomy and the renaming of the NWFP within the federal framework of Pakistan. However, successive Pakistani governments frequently portrayed these constitutional demands as a separatist movement under the banner of *Pashtunistan* to delegitimize the Pashtun political cause. Although the *Pashtunistan* issue briefly re-emerged during the Bhutto era, this revival was largely associated with a militant faction of Pashtun nationalists that sought support from Afghanistan rather than with the mainstream Pashtun leadership. This article therefore argues that *Pashtunistan* has frequently been misrepresented as a separatist movement. Although successive Afghan governments employed the issue to advance their territorial and strategic interests, the principal Pashtun political leadership in Pakistan increasingly pursued constitutional politics within the Pakistani federation. Consequently, *Pashtunistan* should be understood not as a sustained project of secession but as an evolving political discourse whose meaning changed in response to constitutional developments, state policies, and the changing dynamics of Pak-Afghan relations.

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- ⁹ The Durand Line is named after the British Col. Mortimer Durand, who in 1893 successfully negotiated a frontier agreement between Afghanistan and India. This Line was unchallenged as the legal political boundary until 1947, when, with the partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, Afghanistan rejected the Line as a boundary. The Afghan rejection is based on the premise that the Durand Agreement, which established the Durand Line, lapsed when the British transferred control to Pakistan in 1947. See Central Intelligence Agency, Office of Research and Reports, *Geographic Support Project: The Durand Line* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, July 1961), 4-9.
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