

Mediation, Conflict, and Identity: The Role of Non State Actors in Peacebuilding in Balochistan, Pakistan, a Social Identity Perspective

**Khalida Hira¹, Moomal Manzoor², Dr. Kiran Sami³, Dr. Fozia Aamir Siddiqui⁴,
Kamal Mustafa⁵**

¹ Ph.D Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Sindh, khalida.hira.s@gmail.com

² Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, University of Sindh, moomalsoomro26@gmail.com

³ Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Sindh,

⁴ Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Sindh

⁵ Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Sindh, kamalsammoo@gmail.com

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Abstract

Pakistan's largest but poorest province, Balochistan, has been plagued by ethno-political conflict based on tribal antagonisms, political neglect and competing group identities. This paper presents a political science/political psychology argument that the role of non-state actors in peace processes in Balochistan cannot be fully understood without reference to social identity theory (SIT) as articulated by Henri Tajfel. In a wide-ranging review of the scholarly literature, the paper explores the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) and community leaders (Sardars and Maliks) as identity brokers - actors who manage, reshape and rebuild the group identities that simultaneously serve as a source of conflict and the building blocks for peace. The paper finds that the psychological processes identified by SIT (in-group favoritism, out-group threat, social categorization, and salience of the superordinate category) are evident in the dynamics of inter-tribal and ethno-political conflict in Balochistan, and that non-state actors' successful peacebuilding interventions are, in fact, exercises in identity psychology. These insights are placed within an integrated analytical framework that draws on SIT, conflict transformation, feminist, social constructionist, transitional justice and actor-oriented approaches to understanding peace processes. The findings suggest that peace in Balochistan can only be achieved through targeted identity-level interventions that are psychologically savvy, culturally sensitive, and institutionally underpinned.

Keywords: Mediation, Balochistan, Non-State Actors, Peacebuilding, Social Identity Theory

Introduction

The most populous of Pakistan's four provinces, Balochistan has a long history of political turmoil, insurgency, and structural grievance. The history of violence in the province is intimately tied to the complex tribal and ethnic composition of the province: Baloch, Brahui, Pashtun and Hazara people live alongside each other, bringing with them a range of historical narratives, political agendas and cultural identities that have been exploited by state and non-state actors in various ways to advance their respective goals. This has produced a complex conflict in which tribal, ethno-nationalist, and sectarian violence overlap on each other. Official state endeavors have struggled to cope with this complexity. Security interventions have exacerbated rather than alleviated tensions; bureaucratic reforms have ignored structural

inequalities that underpin grievances; and political processes have stalled in the face of mutual suspicion. In the absence of effective state mechanisms, non-state actors, civil society organizations (CSOs) and traditional leaders have taken on the mantle of peacebuilders, working through informal mechanisms the state struggles to match.

This paper proposes the peacebuilding efforts of these non-state actors can be seen not only as a political science problem of institutional design, power sharing, and governance, but also as a psychological problem of identity management, intergroup perception, and cognitive reframing. This paper takes social identity theory (SIT), developed by Henri Tajfel (1981). SIT asserts that people identify themselves in terms of the groups to which they belong, and that these group identities engender powerful psychological dynamics favoritism towards in-groups, derision of out-groups, and competitive inter-group relations that fit remarkably well with the dynamics of inter-tribal conflict in Balochistan. This paper advances the emerging interdisciplinary field of political psychology, which applies psychological theories and methods to the study of political phenomena, by foregrounding social identity theory. This paper shows that the interdependence of political science and psychology when it comes to the study of identity-based conflict: to understand why such conflicts persist, and why some peacebuilding attempts work when others do not, it is necessary to focus on both the large-scale, institutional factors highlighted by political science, and on the small-scale, cognitive-psychological factors highlighted by social psychology.

Literature review

Civil society organizations as peacebuilding agents

The literature on civil society engagement in Balochistan reveals a broad and multi-faceted pattern of organizational activity which is directed at reducing the conflict and building the social foundations of peace. Malik (2020) identifies that there is a plethora of elements that can be helpful towards the reproach and resolution of the root causes of the conflicts and wars, including but not limited to conflict resolution skills, mediation techniques, and leadership skills, and most of the CSO has taken measures to provide these skills to the community leaders and members. In addition, the empowerment of the local population to become change agents of the country has always been a focal point of any development effort. A persistent theme in the literature is the emphasis on inclusivity and participatory engagement. Tareen (2024) argues that the other essential component of building bridges in Balochistan is to increase inclusivity and diversity, ensuring that all minority and women's voices are heard during dialogues. They try to bridge all divides based on socio-cultural similarities and ensure the participation of marginalized populations. Karim (2022) stresses that monitoring and evaluating peacebuilding interventions is essential towards a sustaining approach, where lessons are learned and tailored approaches are applied in subsequent interventions. Religious and traditional leaders have influence in their communities for peace and harmony. Jafri (2021) observes that religion teaches what is expected within religious and cultural norms that they establish; for this reason, messages of peace, nonviolence, and tolerance is promoted by religious leaders. For that matter, CSOs in Baluchistan have also reached out to traditional and religious leaders to assist with the peacebuilding efforts by enabling the moral doctrines of the religious institutions. Aslam et al. (2023) demonstrates the interdependence of poverty, unemployment, and instability is all interconnected in Balochistan. In this regard, CSOs carry out development programs to enhance citizens' well-being, promote employment opportunities, improve the quality of education and healthcare delivery, and compensate for disparities in resource distribution. In this way, CSOs help create a favourable environment for peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts by addressing the core reasons for conflicts and improving the citizens' quality of life. Additionally, CSOs participate in cross-border initiatives that help the communities on both sides of the border to

understand and cooperate. Asif et al. (2018) documents the cross-border efforts are beneficial in terms of promoting understanding and reconciliation among the conflicting parties. Due to cooperation and organization of meetings, cultural events, and joint projects, people from both sides of the border can transcend political barriers and establish personal relationships. Not surprisingly, cross-border CSO initiatives help build friendship bridges between communities and mitigate tensions, promoting stability. Also, the Balochistan CSOs cooperate with the media outlets to spread the word of peace, tolerance, and dialogue. Furthermore, religious faith is recognized as an essential factor that can either instigate interfaith violence or be used to promote peace. Thus, CSOs in Balochistan also encourage interreligious dialogue and start religious literacy training to encourage diverse religious communities and ethnic groups to cooperate. Reza (2023) describes that CSOs from Balochistan have tried to apply religious exchange, interfaith dialogues, and cultural events to promote understanding and respect. As a result, the cooperation between religious representatives led to developing a strong network based on trust and linked by diversity. Considering the above, CSOs in Balochistan also understand the importance of mechanisms in rounding past wrongdoings to promote better reconciliation. For instance, the research conducted by Zaheer et al (2019) stresses the essentiality of recognition and reparation actions, which might help establish the climate for future peace and order. Thus, the CSOs in question embark on processes involving truth, accountability, and reconciliation to ensure the potential for long-term peace. As a result, the strategies for promoting peace development in Balochistan include launching initiatives to address environmental issues and prevent conflicts over resources. Aftab et al (2018) documents ecological degradation is interconnected with the economic hardships, people experience due to the scarcity of resources. CSOs started their environmental conservation and restoration initiatives. The ecological peacebuilding process includes campaigns for proper waste disposal, the introduction of biodegradable packing, and other improvements to foster environmentally friendly behaviour. In Baluchistan, CSOs work with collages and schools to promote peace education and encourage the development of conflict resolution skills.

Traditional leadership and indigenous Conflict Resolution

Traditional leaders i.e. Sardars, Maliks, and tribal elders constitute the second critical pillar of non-state actors peacebuilding in Balochistan. Unlike CSO's, whose authority derives from organizational capacity and formal mandates, traditional leaders draw their power from earned community trust, accumulated credibility of sustained service and inherited cultural legacy. Malik (2018) examines that Sardars and Maliks have been involved in deliberating with the government, nongovernmental organization personnel and even multinational companies' employees to establish new strategies to discuss the extraction and development of resources. In this way, community leaders are working on protecting the interests of the community and improve transparency in their interactions with the external actors. Although the traditional leaders are typically men, the women have also played a significant role in the dialogue and trust building. As examined by Brohi (2016), women played a role of mediators and promoters of the intra-community reconciliation having an opportunity to do so while sitting on the council or working in a women-led Nongovernmental Organization. However, women remain vastly underrepresented in public life. The role of women in dialogue and trust-building seems significant, given the specific cultural norms which require women and men to be separated. Further, the function of traditional leaders is not restricted to the resolution of the conflicts and extends to community and social development efforts. Durrani (2020), documents a wide range of resources and heightened authority that allow traditional leaders to attract investments, secure educational, medical, and infrastructure-related needs, and encourage disadvantaged groups for better economic performance. Ashraf and Shahzad (2020), trace the institutional evolution of

peace committees in the province since the 1980s. Karim (2022) identifies that the traditional leaders are using social media to send messages of peace, resolve conflicts, and organise support for local events. By doing so, they are extending their geographical reach and making the dialogue more accessible to the younger generation by using digital technologies and tools. Also, integrating traditional knowledge and practices into the formal state governance structures has helped to promote more inclusive and sustainable approaches to conflict resolution. While referring to the local tradition of convening tribal councils and enforcing customary law, Hasan et al (2023), have confirmed that in Balochistan, such a system has existed for centuries. However, in the modern era, the tribal system has become formally recognized by the state, allowing for traditional leaders to have some power in municipal decision-making. This implies a blend of traditional and modern governance principles selected by the people to enhance the trust and cooperation between the state and local communities.

Theoretical framework

The analytical methodology used in this paper is consciously interdisciplinary, as it attests to the twin aims of making contributions to political science and political psychology. The theoretical framework incorporates, social identity theory as the integrative prism in the light of which the psychological processes involved in conflict and peacebuilding in Balochistan are observed.

Social Identity Theory: Psychological Foundation.

The theory that forms the basis of this paper is social identity theory that was formulated by Henri Tajfel (1981). In its most basic form, SIT suggests that human beings are not individuals but members of social groups and that membership in groups is a major aspect of self-concept. When people identify themselves as part of a group of people such as a tribe, ethnicity, religious affiliation or even nation, they come to identify themselves in part by the attributes, values and status of that group. The consequences of this social identification on intergroup relations are far-reaching since they create psychological strains to in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination despite a lack of objective material conflict. The central concept of Tajfel, which was based on his experiments of minimal group paradigm, was that the very process of sorting people into groups, no matter how random these groups are, is enough to generate the behaviour of discrimination. The participants who were allocated to meaningless groups according to the insignificant criteria still showed systematic preferential treatment of in-group members over out-group members when allocating resources. This result showed that intergroup discrimination is not merely a competitive reaction to limited available resources as realistic conflict theory would explain but a cognitive and motivational effect of group membership per se. When applied to Balochistan, this observation implies that tribal and ethnic warfare cannot be entirely accounted in terms of objective land, water or political representation grievances; it is also perpetuated by the psychological process of group identity that force out-group members to seem threatening or inferior in spite of their actual actions.

Discussion

Toward a Psychologically Informed Peacebuilding Architecture

The conceptual framework created in this paper leads to a number of principles of how to design more effective peacebuilding programming in Balochistan. First, peacebuilding interventions must be clearly planned taking into consideration their identity-level impacts rather than their material or institutional impacts. Programs must not be judged solely based on their effects on livelihood indicators or governance metrics but also on their implications on intergroup attitudes, identity threat perceptions, and cross-cutting versus divisive identity salience. Second, the institutional design and identity management should seek the formal incorporation of traditional

conflict resolution arrangements into the structures of state governance. The hybrid system of governance where tribal councils are integrated with the state legal authority has given rise to a system whereby the legitimacy of the traditional institutions in terms of identity strengthens the institutional authority of the state something neither institution could have created separately as Hasan at el (2023) records. Third, the international partners and donor agencies can invest in psychologically informed capacity building of the CSOs and traditional leaders with the aim of providing peacebuilding practitioners with an identity dynamic that would allow them to develop more effective contact programs, dialogue facilitations processes, and community reconciliation programs. Bashir et al (2023) highlights the potential change these collaborations have when they are based on profound respect of local cultural knowledge.

Conclusion

This article has developed a two-fold political science and political psychology thesis regarding the contribution of non-state actors in the peacebuilding in Balochistan. The focus on social identity theory as the main analysis tool has revealed that the mechanics of the inter-tribal and ethno-political war in the province are not only a political and structural phenomenon but also a highly psychological one, which are the result of the identity-driven process of cognition and motivation that SIT has been recording and describing over the last four decades. The paper has indicated those CSOs and the traditional community leaders in Balochistan work, at best, as identity brokers: actors who mediate the construction, activation, and transformation of group identities in a way that minimizes intergroup hostility and makes psychological space to reconcile. Their interfaith dialogues, cultural rituals, capacity-building courses and resource negotiations are, social identity-wise, applications of identity psychology: interventions in the psychological milieu of conflict that are effective because they alter the identity processes that perpetuate violence. The combination of two views of political science and political psychology creates an analytical model that is stronger than both disciplines. The field of political science throws light on the structural and institutional contexts in which identity processes are occurring, and the field of political psychology throws light on the mental and motivational processes by which these contexts generate political behavior. Peacebuilding in Balochistan needs to be implemented at both levels of analysis at the same time, both structural grievances and identity-level injuries to be implemented in a sequenced plan that does not ignore the material factors that cause conflict and underestimates the fact that identities are psychological matters.

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