

Sectarian and Ethnic Divisions as Drivers of Political Instability in Pakistan

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Abstract

Despite historical, political, economic, and external factors that play into sectarian and ethnic divisions as contributing to the genesis of political instability in Pakistan, this article takes a deeper look at how sectarian and ethnic divisions have impacted political instability in recent history. While deep rooting understandings of the partition of British India are only exacerbating the latter effects of centralized governance, economic inequality and institutional neglect. Strong among the factors that have promoted sectarian polarization under external influences, which have been intensified, are the Iran-Saud rivalry and regional conflicts such as the Afghan Jihad, while domestic political strategies prey on ethnic identities, thus worsening unrest. The study uses a qualitative research methodology where secondary sources such as scholarly articles, books and government reports were used thematically to find patterns pertaining to governance, policy implementation and societal cohesion. The theoretical lens is Social Identity Theory which helps explains how in group favoritism and out group bias only reinforce fragmentation. Recommendations for inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, institutional reforms and priority giving to national cohesion should feature prominently. Such challenges need a solution which should be holistic approach to deal with, it should provide a stable, unified and inclusive Pakistan.

Key words: Ethnic, Political, Sectarian, Pakistan, Groups

Introduction

Sectarian and ethnic division, particularly in their most persistent form, is one of the most pervasive challenges to political stability, rendering nations incapable of creating political immunity, even though their citizens can do so. For Pakistan, these divisions are even more dangerous on account of the nation's overarching character, one embedded in complex historical, cultural and political continuums. These ethnic groups were not the only matter inherited by Pakistan, when it was born out of the partition of British India in 1947: the deeply embedded sectarian divide was also in its heritage (Jaffrelot, 2015). In the meantime, these divisions have become deeper and much to the detriment of political stability and national development. Significance of studying these dynamics concerns their tremendous implications for governance, security, and social commune in Pakistan. This has been frequently the case wherever ethnic and sectarian divisions have been sources of political instability. Examples of how such partitions degenerate into breakdown of governance, promote violence and undermine political systems include ethnic conflict in the Balkans, sectarian violence in the Middle East, and ethnic tensions in Sub-Saharan Africa (Horowitz, 1985). In Iraq and Syria, sectarianism, especially, has been a big contributing factor to conflicts there, where the Sunnis and Shiites have continued fighting and external interventions (Nasr, 2007). Ethnic polarization has, with similar fatal effect, ripped apart nations like Rwanda and South Sudan (Straus, 2019). And indeed, these global examples bear witness to how ethnic and sectarian polarization intersect with politics and governance call for

addressing. The bluntness with which these dynamics play out in Pakistan—the nation that embodies political cleavages to an almost pathological extent—is the most literal illustration of how such tremors can drive the course of a country's political stability. Back to Pakistan's creation in 1947 are ethnic and sectarian divides. In the partition of British India millions were uprooted and borders between religions redrawn. But Pakistan, in no sense, was homogeneous at the very beginning when it first came into existence. Including Punjabis, Siddhis, Pashtuns, Baloch and Bengalis (a term which before the country split into the two separate nations of Bangladesh and Pakistan in 1971, referred to a conglomeration of people and not an ethnicity) (Talbot, 2014). The divide also increased, over time, between the Sunni and Shia Muslims. Pakistan was to be a homeland for Muslims and the Sunni majority usually dominated political and social constructs, leaving many minority groups feeling marginalized (Zaman, 1998). Policies introduced by the Zia-ul-Haq era (1977–1988) exacerbated sectarianism further because Islamization initiatives funded and promoted by the state through their Islamization policies put a preference on Sunni interpretations of Islam that came at the expense of Shia communities. On this basis, sectarian violence still persists today (Abbas, 2015). Nearby ethnic tensions, however, worsened after separation of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1971 when the state had to contend with separatist and equitable resource distribution demands from smaller provinces. Baloch insurgency, Sindhi nationalism and urban center based ethnic politics rose up further to divide the country and challenge the federal structure of governance (Adeney, 2016). But Pakistan's societal divisions are multi layered, ranging from ethnic or religious identities. Ethnic polarization is evident in the political and cultural differences among the four major provinces: It includes Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. They are home to distinct ethnic groups who often flaunt attachment to provincial or ethnic ties ahead of national cohesion (Shaikh, 2018). Since the 1970s there have been several insurgencies linked to Baloch demands of greater autonomy over natural resources (Gul, Makki, & Yamin, 2022). Sindh and Karachi - particularly due to ethnic clashes and political fragmentation - have had similar Mohajir identity politics (Gayer, 2014). As opposed to sectarian divisions, Sunni-Shia divisions are essentially the most dominant form of having sectarian divides. They have often tipped into violence, and extremist groups attacked Shia processions, mosques and leaders. Sectarianism has come to include other minorities, such as Ahmadis and Christians, who have helped divide society over the years (Felbab-Brown). Extreme ideologies and the rise in extremist groups, backed external actors, have become the new drivers of political instability, and the sectarian divide has advanced (Fair, 2014). Other is the fact that ethnic and sectarianism intersect. In some cases, these identities overlap allowing for a uniquely undulate dynamic. For instance Shia communities in Gilgit-Baltistan (including Shia Burusho and Shia Isma'eeli) or Hazara Shi'as in Quetta are marginalised not just because of their sect but also because of their ethnic identities as the Shi'a Bactrians in Balkh, Afghanistan are not (Harrison, 1981). Coupled with these are overlapping divisions that confuse efforts toward political stability and social cohesion. Pakistan's political stability is a very compounded issue of sectarian and ethnic polarization. Its effect on governance is one of the most important. Resource allocation, policymaking and administrative decisions are colored by ethnic and sectarian divides which can be perceived to facilitate favoritism, exclusion, or corruption. For example, the federal government in Punjab, frequently accused by smaller provinces such as Sindh and Balochistan of monopolizing resources and sidelining their political voices, is itself accused by others of hegemony in failing to take genuinely provincial views and realities into account. It has fomented resentment and a distrust that the legitimacy of federal institutions is etched away (Moeed, 2014).

Literature Review:

To understand the theoretical underpinnings of sectarian and ethnic divisions with consequent political instability in Pakistan, an exploration of some key frameworks is required. The roles

played by political institutions and the type of primordialism, instrumentalism, and constructivism coalesced into these are discussed. If anything, each takes a different angle and gives a different perspective on the intricacies of Pakistan's socio-political makeup (Adeney K. S., 2003). Primordialism maintains that ethnic identities are solidly grounded and long enduring, and generally biologically based. The idea is this: ethnic conflicts stem from these ancient hates and historical animosities. In Pakistan, then, a diverse regional composition can be read like this and the ancient cultural and historical divides keep on propping up divide. But critics say that primordialism simplifies what more often is a fluid and constructed category of identity (Siddiqi, 2012). Nevertheless, instrumentalism claims that the primordial idea of ethnicity is contradicted by questioning the idea that ethnic identities are noumenal identities which the people have for their own sake, if you will. Nations with leaders from time to time based themselves on ethnic feelings have policies favouring one group over another. Very often this manipulation accentuates divisions and promotes instability. For example, under the General Zia-ul-Haq regime, state Islamization policies were interpreted to mean in favour of Sunni and against the interests of the Shia communities and would only further spew sectarian divide (Shah & Qazi, 2023). The second type of approach imagines ethnic and sectarian identities as a socially constructed and socially evolving constructivism. This theory claims that histories, interactions and political discourses present history, as group identities develop over time. Colonial heritage and subsequent nation building activities in Pakistan have imparted a great measure of perception and practice of ethnic and sectarian identity. Most of the time, the state's attempts to forge a national identity that didn't always coincide with notions of reality on the ground caused resistance and conflict (Shabbir, Ali, & Jawad, 2024). Whether or not ethnic and sectarian conflicts are mitigated or exacerbated, political institutions matter. The weak institutions may not be capable of handling diversity and people may experience themselves as left out and pressurized from opportunities. However in Pakistan, small provinces like Balochistan and Sindh have been alienated from federalism where sometimes they have found the centralized power, turning it against insurgency (Naheed, 2024). Ethnic tensions are also dependent on economic disparities. Intergroup animosities may be heightened by competition over resources, employment or development opportunities. Typically, economic development has been uneven in Pakistan because some regions have felt deprived compared to others along ethnic lines. This economic marginalization can, and is, being instrumentalized by ethnic leaders as a tool to mobilise support against alleged injustices (Jabeen, 2023). According to the theory of security dilemma, when the authority of a state is weak, they ethnic groups armed themselves may trigger others groups' arming processes and then all of the leads to the arms race and the conflict. From a lens of groups whose strategic interests have to be defended against a non-existent state, the growth of armed sectarian organizations makes sense (Rashid, 2012). People derive a sense of self and self esteem from their groups. In societies like Pakistan where there is a mix of ethnics, a strong in group identification can culminate in out group discrimination, especially when groups compete to get an equal place in terms of available resources and/or political power. Such a theory helps explain the persistence of ethnic and sectarian prejudices in which group members work to enhance their status in comparison to others (Ahmad, 2021). Another concept which is plays in here is of relative deprivation which means that groups are thinking that it is other than the type of expectations and that are and that they are looking for. If ethnic or sectarian group feels they are not being represented politically or participating in economy to their satisfaction and begin to demand change, Pakistan can see discontent (Rehman, 2006). Domestic ethnic and sectarian relations involve dynamics influenced by global geopolitical dynamics. It can embolden the groups they support, shifting internal power balance in a direction Brauner suggested is not in the government's favor. At times, involvement in regional conflicts and the sway over its neighbors have compounded internal divisions, a case now in point being the Afghan Jihad and its aftermath (Shaikh R. A., 2011). It is concluded that a multi faced

theoretical view built around primordialist, instrumentalist, constructivist, and institutional perspective is necessary to assess the dynamic unfolding of sectarian and ethnic divide in polarization and instability of Pakistan's polity. The ability to understand how historical legacies, elite manipulation, economic disparities, and institutional weaknesses all play together will give us something concrete to work with as we confront these challenges and make for a more stable and inclusive society.

Research Questions:

Q1: What are the primary political, economic, and historical factors driving sectarian and ethnic divisions in Pakistan?

Q2: How do external geopolitical influences and domestic political strategies escalate sectarian and ethnic conflicts in Pakistan?

Material and Methods:

The focus of this study is to understand how sectarian and ethnic divisions are unfolding towards political instability in Pakistan and the research design we utilized was qualitative research with secondary sources. The information is sourced from books, government reports, historical documents, scholarly articles on platforms including Google Scholar and JSTOR. There is a thematic analysis of the literature where patterns of governance, policy implementation and societal cohesion are identified. Contextual reflections over the Baloch insurgency and the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM). Reliability comes from triangulation which consists of bringing together different sources and ethical standards are well maintained by correct citing and acknowledging sources.

Theoretical framework:

Social Identity Theory (SIT) provides an elaborately reflexive understanding about how sectarian and ethnic divisions played a role in political instability in Pakistan. With SIT, Henri Tajfel and John Turner developed their theory whereby individuals first get their identification through their group memberships. In multiracial, multi religious countries like Pakistan, this leads to discrimination of an out group and favoritism in group (Tajfel, 1979). The relevance of the theory to understanding the social and political fragmentation in the country is particularly to Identification Dynamics and Inter group relations. Key assumptions of SIT are based on some assumptions. Second, people tend to split themselves and others into social categories (ethnicity, sect, and so forth), which eases complicated social surroundings (Hogg, 2016). Second, people get a sense of belonging by group identification and build strong emotional affiliation with their group. Groups do it to compare themselves to others to maintain positive self-esteem and this often drives inter group competition and conflict. Next, group members consciously favor one group over all others (i.e., they favor the in group and treat out groups as being 'less than' or 'different from' the in group), which is referred to as in group favoritism and out group bias (Abbink & Harris, 2019). Ethnic categorization and group identity are deep rooted in Pakistan. The country has population of difference ethnic groups such as Punjabis, Siddhis, Peshtonis and Baluch. Each ethnic and having own cultural, lingual and historic identities. More often than not, these groups struggle for their own resources or political power and consider themselves as already being in opposition with others. The Baloch people are a case in point, they want bigger autonomy because they felt they were marginalized by the Punjabi dominated federal government (Siddiqi, 2012). The strong in group loyalty insulates itself from feelings of persecution against perceived out groups feeding into instability tensions. These are further complicated by sectarian divisions. The most salient example of sectarian identification is when members of each sect identify with their sect by its religion and view other sect as a threat (Nasr, 2007). External influences only heighten the

polarization: It is the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia; and choosing one sect over another is a longstanding policy when dealing with domestic issues. Sectarian identification is not only a tool to divide, but is one that on fertile ground for violence and political manipulation. Inter group comparisons are what plays the role of fuel in grievances in Pakistan. The smaller provinces like Sindh and Balochistan believe that the Punjab is coping with federal power and resources. However, this perception is deeply rooted in economic disparities, but also has been unquestionably derived as a result of the historical narratives of exploitation that have grown these views. Such comparisons rarely fail to provoke calls for increased provincial autonomy, and on rare occasions they even result in sections of the country being declared in state of insurgency which is detrimental for the country's peace and security. (Khan, 2023). Ethnic and sectarian identity are deeply polarizing on the ground in Pakistan, and Pakistani political leaders and parties rely on their exploitation in order to mobilize support. Identity politics is practiced by ethnic parties, such as the Quami Movement (MQM) in Sindh, and the Balochistan National Party (BNP) in Baluchistan (Waseem, 2010). This instrumentalization of group identities further degrades intergroup competition, marginalization and the perpetuation of political fragmentation. The out-group bias central role continues to perpetuate sectarian violence. Sunni militant groups in Pakistan often attack Shia communities because they say the group fails to support Islam's unity or sovereignty. Perhaps this is not just a reactionary ideological slant but also a reactionary economic sudio-political slant. All these falls together with such lack of effective mediation of these conflicts by state institutions as it creates long term instability (Abbas, 2011). SIT has important lessons to teach us about the very reasons these ethnic and sectarian divides persist in Pakistan and serve to hinder governance. Based in these dynamics, the theory further extends these divisions by social and political processes. It also reveals the way in which political elites and external actors exploit identity-based grievances to set off cycles of division and conflict. The policy implications of the application of SIT are also explored. The better way is to encourage a nationalist identity which draws not only on ethnic but also sectarian identities. Dealing with resource distribution and economic incongruity would reduce inter group confrontations and contention. Conflict resolution mechanisms help foster understanding, inter group dialogue (Jaffrelot 2015). But it also is critical to maintain social amity to put in place stricter oversight of elected officials and parties who profit politically from identity-based divisions. This study uses Social Identity Theory to explain Pakistan's political instability showing the role of identity dynamics. The theory assumes that political fragmentation can be mitigated only if both structural and psychological factors are tackled at the same time and favorably, and while a more inclusive and stable political system.

Discussion Model:

Roots of Sectarian and Ethnic Divisions in Pakistan

Colonial Legacies and Partition

The partition of British India in 1947 was a traumatic event that led to the displacement of millions and the redrawing of borders along religious lines. While Pakistan was envisioned as a homeland for Muslims, it inherited a diverse population with distinct ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities. The migration of Mohajirs (Urdu-speaking Muslims) to Karachi created tensions with the indigenous Sindhis, as the newcomers dominated key economic and administrative positions (Talbot, 2014). Similarly, the unequal integration of Pashtuns, Punjabis, Sindhis, and Baloch into the new state's political framework fostered a sense of alienation among smaller ethnic groups (Jaffrelot, 2015).

Centralized Governance and Marginalization

From the outset, Pakistan adopted a centralized governance model, which marginalized smaller provinces and ethnic groups. The dominance of Punjab in political and military institutions led to perceptions of exclusion in regions like Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan (Adeney,

2016). The federal government's failure to devolve power or address provincial grievances exacerbated these divisions. The One Unit Scheme (1955–1970), which merged provinces into a single administrative unit, is a stark example of centralized policies that alienated smaller ethnic groups, particularly the Baloch and Sindhis (Shaikh, 2018).

Post-1971 Ethnic Assertiveness

The secession of East Pakistan in 1971 marked a turning point in Pakistan's history, underscoring the dangers of neglecting ethnic diversity. The failure to accommodate Bengali demands for autonomy and equitable representation highlighted the shortcomings of centralized policies (Talbot, 2014). After 1971, smaller provinces, particularly Balochistan and Sindh, became more vocal in asserting their ethnic identities. The Baloch insurgency, which began in the 1970s, was fueled by grievances over resource exploitation and political marginalization. Similarly, Sindhi nationalism gained momentum in response to what was perceived as domination by the Punjabi elite (Adeney, 2016).

Zia's Islamization and Sectarianism

The regime of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988) played a critical role in institutionalizing sectarian divisions. Zia's Islamization policies, aimed at consolidating Sunni dominance, marginalized Shia communities and provided fertile ground for sectarian militancy (Nasr, 2007). The introduction of discriminatory laws, such as the Hudood Ordinances, further alienated minority sects and ethnic groups. These policies not only deepened the Sunni-Shia divide but also entrenched the use of religion as a tool for political mobilization (Abbas, 2011).

Exclusionary National Narratives

Historical narratives in Pakistan have often been used to promote a singular national identity, sidelining the contributions and identities of smaller ethnic groups. School curricula and official narratives predominantly emphasize Punjabi-Muslim culture, ignoring the diversity of the country (Shaikh, 2018). This exclusionary approach has fueled resentment among marginalized communities, reinforcing ethnic and sectarian divisions (Jaffrelot, 2015).

Geopolitical Influences and Domestic Political Strategies Escalating Sectarian and Ethnic Conflicts

Iran-Saudi Rivalry

The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has significantly contributed to sectarian polarization in Pakistan. Sunni groups, often receiving ideological and financial backing from Saudi Arabia, have become increasingly emboldened, while Shia groups align themselves with Iran for political and religious support. This external interference has heightened tensions between Sunni and Shia communities, often manifesting in violent sectarian clashes (Fair, 2015). The flow of funds, religious training, and logistical support from these nations has transformed localized grievances into a broader geopolitical issue. The rivalry has led to the emergence of sectarian militant groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, which have targeted Shia communities under the guise of ideological warfare (Nasr, 2007).

Afghan Jihad and Pashtun Nationalism

The Afghan Jihad of the 1980s and subsequent conflicts have reshaped Pashtun identity in Pakistan. The influx of Afghan refugees and the proliferation of militancy along the Durand Line amplified Pashtun nationalism, culminating in movements like the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM). The PTM demands accountability for military operations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and tribal areas, which many Pashtuns perceive as disproportionate and discriminatory. The Afghan conflict has not only fueled ethnic grievances but also destabilized the region, creating an environment where militant groups thrive (Abbas, 2011).

Post-9/11 Interventions

International interventions post-9/11 have further complicated Pakistan's ethnic and sectarian dynamics. The Global War on Terror led to military operations in tribal areas, displacing millions and disproportionately affecting Pashtun communities. These operations were often viewed as targeting specific ethnic groups, reinforcing perceptions of systemic bias (Shaikh, 2018). In Balochistan, the militarization of counterinsurgency efforts intensified local grievances, fueling insurgencies and deepening ethnic divisions.

State-Sponsored Militancy

The state's tacit support for militant groups during the Afghan Jihad and the Kashmir conflict has had long-term consequences for sectarian harmony. By nurturing Sunni extremist organizations as strategic assets, the state indirectly empowered groups that now destabilize the country internally (Abbas, 2011). These groups, such as Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), have perpetuated violence against Shia communities, intensifying sectarian divides.

Provincial Favoritism

Provincial favoritism in resource allocation and development strategies has deepened inter-provincial animosities. Punjab's perceived dominance in federal resource distribution has alienated smaller provinces like Balochistan and Sindh. This economic marginalization fosters resentment, fueling ethnic nationalism and insurgencies. For example, Baloch grievances over the exploitation of natural resources without adequate provincial benefit remain a central issue in the ongoing insurgency.

Exploitation of Identity Politics

Domestic political leaders have consistently exploited ethnic and sectarian identities to consolidate power. Ethnic-based parties like the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) have mobilized Mohajir identity in Karachi, often at the expense of Sindhi and Pashtun communities. Similarly, alliances formed along sectarian lines during elections exacerbate religious polarization. This manipulation of identity politics creates a fragmented society where collective action for national interests becomes nearly impossible (Gayer, 2014).

Cross-Cutting Themes

Political Centralization and Economic Marginalization

Political centralization and economic marginalization are deeply interconnected. The federal government's failure to equitably distribute resources fuels ethnic grievances, particularly in regions like Balochistan, where perceptions of exploitation and exclusion are prevalent. These grievances often manifest as demands for autonomy, creating additional political instability (Adeney, 2016).

Manipulation of Identities

Both political leaders and external actors manipulate ethnic and sectarian identities to further their agendas. This manipulation fosters persistent instability, as identity-based grievances are instrumentalized rather than resolved (Shaikh, 2018). The entrenchment of identity politics undermines national cohesion and amplifies divisions.

Weak State Institutions

Weak state institutions are unable to effectively mediate disputes or address grievances, allowing conflicts to escalate. Selective law enforcement and judicial biases further erode public trust, reinforcing perceptions of inequality. Strengthening institutional capacities and ensuring equitable justice are critical to mitigating these issues (Abbas, 2011).

Conclusion:

The research highlights the profound impact of sectarian and ethnic divisions on political instability in Pakistan, underscoring the interplay of political, economic, historical, and external factors. Historically rooted grievances stemming from the partition, centralized governance, and

institutional neglect have laid the foundation for ethnic and sectarian polarization. Events such as the One Unit Scheme and Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies have further deepened divisions, fostering resentment and alienation among marginalized groups. Externally, geopolitical rivalries, particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia, have fueled sectarian conflicts by providing ideological and material support to competing factions. The Afghan conflict and the Global War on Terror have exacerbated ethnic tensions, particularly among Pashtun communities, while intensifying insurgencies in regions like Balochistan. Domestically, state-backed militancy, selective development policies, and the exploitation of identity politics by political elites have perpetuated instability and hindered national cohesion. Theoretical insights from Social Identity Theory illustrate how identity dynamics drive in-group favoritism and out-group bias, reinforcing societal fragmentation. The manipulation of ethnic and sectarian identities by both internal and external actors has created cycles of violence and exclusion that undermine governance and social harmony. To address these challenges, a comprehensive approach is essential. Equitable governance, inclusive development, and mechanisms to mediate inter-group grievances are critical for fostering unity. Neutralizing external influences and regulating political exploitation of identities are equally important. Strengthening institutions and promoting a shared national identity can pave the way for sustainable political stability in Pakistan. Addressing the deep-seated structural and psychological factors of division is imperative to build a more cohesive and resilient society.

Recommendations

- Implement policies that ensure equitable representation of all ethnic and sectarian groups in political institutions. Decentralize power through effective federalism, allowing provinces like Balochistan, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa greater autonomy in decision-making to address regional grievances and reduce perceptions of Punjabi dominance.
- Address economic disparities by prioritizing balanced development across provinces. Allocate resources transparently to marginalized regions, particularly Balochistan and Sindh, ensuring that local communities benefit from natural resource extraction to mitigate ethnic nationalism and insurgency.
- Reform state institutions to enhance their ability to mediate disputes and deliver equitable justice. Strengthen judicial and law enforcement systems to eliminate biases and ensure impartiality, fostering public trust and reducing sectarian and ethnic tensions.
- Develop inclusive national narratives that celebrate Pakistan's ethnic and cultural diversity. Revise school curricula and public discourse to highlight contributions from all ethnic and sectarian groups, countering exclusionary narratives that emphasize Punjabi-Muslim identity.
- Regulate foreign funding and ideological support to sectarian groups to curb the impact of geopolitical rivalries, such as the Iran-Saudi conflict. Strengthen diplomatic efforts to limit external interference in domestic affairs, reducing the escalation of sectarian violence.

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