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Promoting Civic Interaction and Critical Thinking  
on Key Challenges in Pakistan  
Using Nation's Diversity as an Asset

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# Promoting Civic Interaction and Critical Thinking on Key Challenges in Pakistan Using Nation's Diversity as an Asset

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## Introduction

Cultural, religious, ethnic and linguistic diversity in Pakistan is a fact of life. However, how ruling elites have chosen to understand this diversity and normalise it as part of an average Pakistani's everyday experience and existence is the key question. This question was manifest as early as 1947 with the imbalance between the two wings of the country: the demographic majority yet politically disempowered (East Pakistan) and politically empowered and demographic minority (West Pakistan).<sup>1</sup> The political centralization of power in East Pakistan translated into a framework of governance where the Bengali language was denied recognition combined with political alienation which saw the rise of indigenous Bengali political parties with a strong nationalist inclination in the very early years of Pakistan's independence.<sup>2</sup> Bengali alienation registered an incremental upward trajectory in the post-colonial years with political, economic and identity deprivation which meant that Pakistan's unity as a nation-state was compromised and its nation-building project coming under increased strain from not only Bengali but also other non-dominant ethnic groups.<sup>3</sup>

The secession of East Pakistan in December 1971 is a particularly dark spot and calls into question the Pakistani nation-building project. The secession belied Pakistan's nationalist claims of a cohesive Muslim nation overriding ethnic, linguistic and cultural divides. The fact that ethnic, linguistic and cultural fractionalisation proved enduring compared to a Pakistani-Muslim unity in 1971 and also the post-1971 period necessitates the question of why it is imperative to navigate the unity-diversity dialectic. A critical navigation of this dialectic is imperative if Pakistan's nation-building and national integration project is to appropriate success.<sup>4</sup> At present, Pakistan's periphery particularly the Baloch and Pashtun ethnic groups are inflected with feelings of deep alienation and marginalisation, which begets the question of what will it take to pacify deprived ethnic minorities and ensure healthy, harmonious and cohesive nation-building and national integration.<sup>5</sup>

The Pakistani nation-state project has been prone to seeing diversity in negative terms and endorsing unity with an exclusivist emphasis. This is rooted in an oft-repeated popular slogan: *Pakistan ka matlab kya? La Ilaha Il Allah* (What is the meaning of Pakistan? There is no God but Allah). By way of this exclusivist emphasis, the meaning of a Pakistan person translates into one which is coterminous with Islam and Muslim identity. Hence, a Pakistani person/citizen is essentially Muslim and no one else. And this is where the problem lies and a further question becomes imperative: are Ahmedis, which the Constitution through the Second Amendment defines as non-Muslims, not Pakistani? Are the Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis and other non-Muslim denominations who do not recite the *Kalma* not Pakistani citizens?

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<sup>1</sup> Hasan Zaheer, *The Separation of East Pakistan: The Rise and Realization of Bengali Muslim Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Rounaq Jahan, *Pakistan: Failure in national integration* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> Adeel Khan, *Politics of identity: Ethnic nationalism and the state in Pakistan* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Andreas Wimmer, *Nation Building: Why some countries come together while others fall apart* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Rafiullah Kakar, 'Territorial autonomy and ethnic conflict: the Baloch ethnic question post-18<sup>th</sup> Amendment,' *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 62, no. 3 (2024): 249-274; Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, 'The War of Terror in Praetorian Pakistan: The Emergence and Struggle of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement,' *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 51, no. 3 (2021): 516-529.

This is where the unity-diversity dialectic has to be carefully navigated and explained as part of the Pakistani nation-state project and also the nation-building process. It is imperative that any notion of Pakistani citizenship be framed in civic terms and not exclusively religious or ethnic tropes. Of necessity, the religion of the majority ethnic group will play a determining role in legitimizing political processes, but these do not have to be framed necessarily in a zero-sum understanding where it comes at the expense of religious or even ethnic minorities. Second, opposed to framing diversity as essentially problematic or injurious to national unity, it is important to realize that imposing unity without acknowledging diversity is an essentially self-defeating logic. Take the case of national language of the country, Urdu. According to the 7<sup>th</sup> Population Census, the percentage of Urdu speakers in the country stands at only 9.2%.<sup>6</sup> By this statistic, if were one to superimpose the linguistic criteria of a Pakistani person as one who speaks Urdu as their mother language, more than 90% of people would exit the definition of Pakistani nationhood. Thus, in the same manner as Ahmedis, Hindus, Christians, Parsis and other religious minorities necessitate inclusion in the definition of the Pakistani person, the same inclusive criteria needs application when it comes to language. This implies that a Pakistani can be a person from any confessional faith (Muslim, Ahmedi, Hindu, Christian, Parsi, etc) or any linguistic group (Urdu, Punjabi, Pushto, Sindhi, Balochi, Siraiki, Kashmiris and many others).

This exercise in thinking about Pakistan's national identity is absolutely important if one is to inject a sense of civic engagement in the minds and thoughts of the citizenry. Breeding the ideational notion of 'unity in diversity' with the objective of promoting civic engagement and interaction necessitates addressing important concerns and challenges. But before one comes to the concerns and challenges, it is important to define what civic engagement means. According to Robert Putnam, civic engagement entails citizens pursuing what Tocqueville termed "self-interest properly understood," that is, self-interest defined in the context of broader public needs, self-interest that is "enlightened" rather than "myopic," self-interest that is alive to the interest of others.<sup>7</sup> Adler and Goggin make a similar argument defining civic engagement as relating to 'how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future.'<sup>8</sup> Both definitions are grounded in an individualistic framework and originate from a concern about how self-interested individuals contribute to the wider public good. However, a myopic focus on the agency of the individual is insufficient in explaining social outcomes for civic interactions between individuals take place in a social context where the government and structures of power and authority matter. It is in this wider context that the present policy paper is suggestive and takes account of how agential and structural factors contribute to civic engagement and driving the core emphasis on 'unity in diversity.' In Pakistan, the key question relates to how and in what ways are the Pakistani state and society sufficiently invested in diversity-acceptance both normatively and institutionally? Moreover, what are the key challenges as well as opportunities when comes to civic engagement in Pakistan?

### **1. Rethinking identity**

Identity is a complex and also a controversial subject. It is complex and controversial for meanings imputed to identity at the individual, group or state level can have important consequences for social cohesion and peaceful coexistence at the societal level and also widespread conflicts, wars and violence at the level of the international system. It is imperative then that our thinking about identity is nuanced and careful, which provides avenues for a more empathetic and compassionate understanding. This can come about if the topic of identity is disconnected from its conventionally primordial, exclusivist

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<sup>6</sup> 'Population by mother tongue, sex and rural/urban', *Pakistan Population Census 2023*, [https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/national/table\\_11.pdf](https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/tables/national/table_11.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Robert D. Putnam, Robert Leonardi and Raffaella Y. Nonetti, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 88.

<sup>8</sup> Richard P. Adler and Judy Goggin, 'What do we mean by "civic engagement,"' *Journal of Transformative Education* 3, no. 3 (2005): 241.

orientation and understood in more malleable terms.<sup>9</sup> This is how the modernist and constructivist literature on nations and nationalism views identity not as fixed and static but dynamic and contingent in nature.

Rethinking identity requires that we understand that as individuals we are composed of not one identity but multiple identities.<sup>10</sup> My self-identity is a hybrid mix of national identity (Pakistani)/ ethnic identity (Punjabi, Pushtoon, Sindhi, Baloch, Mohajir, Siraiki, Hazarawal, Kashmiri etc)/ religious identity (Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Parsi)/ sectarian identity (Sunni, Shia, Ahle Hadees, Ahle Sunnah, Tableeghi Jamat)/ geographical (rural/urban)/ class (upper class/middle class/lower class)/ professional (academic, doctor, corporate worker, lawyer, student, researcher)/ familial (husband, wife, son, daughter, brother, sister) and human (the ability to transgress ethnic, religious and sectarian identities and viewing others simply as human beings). These multiple identities, not necessarily a single identity, informs our daily existence, our perceptions of reality and at the same time how we view others who are differently constituted to who we are. These multiple identities within our individual consciousness implies also that national identity does not stand in a zero-sum relationship with ethnic identity. For example, it can be normal for someone to think of themselves as Baloch and Pakistanis or Pushtoons and Pakistanis. The mistake that we make from an ideational perspective relates to incentivizing or imposing the hierarchy of national identity on top of ethnic identity with the expectation that the latter is necessarily injurious to the Pakistani national identity. This was seen as early in Jinnah's following statement: 'It naturally pains me to find the curse of provincialism holding sway over any section of Pakistanis. Pakistan must be rid of this evil.... We are now all Pakistanis – not Baluchis, Pathans, Sindhis, Bengalis, Punjabis, and so on and as Pakistanis we must feel, behave, and act, and we should be proud to be known as Pakistanis and nothing else.'<sup>11</sup>

This unitary meaning of identity focused exclusively on national identity lies at the core of Pakistan's failing at imparting respect and dignity to people's sub-national feelings at the ethnic sub-level.<sup>12</sup> An alternative understanding of identity was provided by a Pashtun ethnonationalist leader some 40 years later after the creation of Pakistan. When asked what his identity was, Abdul Wali Khan replied: 'I am a Pashtoon for 4000 years, a Muslim for 1400 years and a Pakistani for 40 years.'<sup>13</sup> This statement encapsulates the meaning of multiple identities within a single individual consciousness and the fact that Wali Khan is not negating any identity only clarifying how these coexist together. This is how identity needs to be rethought, reframed and retaught in the public domain. As deeply does such a meaning of identity becomes normalised in everyday language and discourse, people's sense of identity will only become more tolerant and acceptant of others. The wrong approach is to strategize how and in what ways people come to think of themselves as Pakistanis only and nothing else. This exclusivist approach has the negative impact of riding roughshod over cultural, tribal, literary and folk histories of millions of people across Pakistan with negative consequences for social cohesion and stability.<sup>14</sup> Rethinking identity entails promoting a shared identity with diversity-acceptance lying at its core.

## **2. Humanity before nationality**

Rethinking identity also entails that while advocating our national, ethnic and religious identities we do not lose sight of our collective identity as a human fraternity.<sup>15</sup> Often discourses on identity are

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<sup>9</sup> Bhikhu Parekh, *A New Politics of Identity: Political Principles for an Interdependent World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Parekh, *A New Politics of Identity*.

<sup>11</sup> *Jinnah Speeches and Statement, 1947-48* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 227-228.

<sup>12</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The demand for dignity and the politics of resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Ian Talbot, *Pakistan: A modern history* (London: Hurst and Company, 1998), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Aitzaz Ahsan, *The Indus Saga and the making of Pakistan* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Linklater, *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1982).



constructed in binary terms (our country right or wrong)<sup>16</sup> where the Othering principle has the tendency to demean and dehumanize minorities as injurious to the nation-building project. This is seen till today in the United States where racism prevails at the cultural level and provides justification for many in the White majority to routinely violate the dignity and honour of the Black person.<sup>17</sup> In India, Muslims face routine direct, structural and cultural violence which is now increasingly normalised by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government which believes in an exclusivist, Hindu religious Indian identity that tends to demean and dehumanize Muslims as injurious and irrelevant to the Indian nation-building project.<sup>18</sup> This exclusivist tendency is indicative of individuals and groups losing sight of basic humanity while styling their respective national or religious/ethnic identity in an arrogant trope with immense hubris attached to it.

The question and challenge here then is: does the nationality principle exclude religious and ethnic minorities and subjects them to a mundane social existence? How can national identity provide a pathway that puts humanity at its core while also celebrating the specific cultural, religious and other identity markers and symbols attached to it? The important task and challenge then is to breed humanity before nationality. As populist politics and parties makes waves across the globe with a strong majoritarian ethos lying at its centre, the celebration of nationality and nationalism is sadly and unfortunately undermining the much needed thinking over humanity and humanism.<sup>19</sup> Mainstreaming humanity as the core of identity recognition entails a dialogical process where state elites provide civic education and direction to citizens in the spirit of diversity-acceptance. This dialogical process in order to appropriate success requires first, institutionalisation at the political and constitutional levels and second, implementation in cases where diversity is undermined or specific minorities targeted for their beliefs and values, which are different to the core group.

### **3. Rising religious majoritarianism: a threat to social cohesion and peaceful coexistence**

In Pakistan today, the biggest challenge facing the country is the exponential rise in religious majoritarianism which is starkly evident in electoral politics, mainstream nationalist politics, and rising incidents of mob violence and mob lynching. This religious majoritarianism is linked with the normalization of the blasphemy discourse at the state and societal levels. General Zia's military regime weaponised colonial-era blasphemy laws by introducing amendments to the Pakistan Penal Code, the most notorious of which was Ordinance XX introduced in 1984 (Haq, 2019). While the nature of colonial blasphemy laws were general in their orientation and not specific to any religious group, Ordinance XX was specific to people of the Ahmadi faith and is entirely exclusionary in nature (Ahmed 2021, 277). The Ordinance prohibits Ahmadis from publically professing Islamic religious terminology; it also prohibits Ahmadis from using religious titles, descriptions or epithets of Muslim origin including also using the word 'Masjid' for their place of worship or referring to their call for prayers as 'Azan' and themselves as 'Muslims' – these words reserved specifically for the majority Muslim community; and the Ordinance also provides that any Ahmadi 'who, directly or indirectly poses himself as a Muslim..... or by visual representations or in any manner whatsoever outrages the religious feelings of Muslims, shall be punished with imprisonment...for a term which may extend to three years and shall also be liable to a fine' (Berberian, 1987, pp. 678-9).

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<sup>16</sup> This quote is attributed to American naval officer, Stephen Decatur (1779-1820), who after leading a naval campaign remarked: 'Our country, in her intercourse with foreign nations may she always be in the right; but our country, may she always be victorious' which was then condensed to the aphorism, 'our country, right or wrong.' William Everett, 'How war demoralizes men,' *The Advocate of Peace (1894-1920)* 65, no. 5 (1903): 91.

<sup>17</sup> Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, *Tyranny of the Minority: Why American democracy reached the breaking point* (New York: Random House, 2023).

<sup>18</sup> Ajay Gudavarthy, *Politics, Ethics and Emotions in 'New India'* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Ashutosh Varshney, 'Populism and Nationalism: An overview of similarities and differences,' *Studies in Comparative International Development* 56 (2021): 131-147.

In recent times, incidents of mob lynching including violence directed against the Ahmadi community have disturbingly increased.<sup>20</sup> This is a novel trend in Pakistani society as during the War on Terror years, Pakistan was confronted with religious extremism of a different kind. This religious extremism was rooted largely in the peripheral areas of the country, more resolutely in the tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and the work of actors such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The TTP is a militant outfit, does not believe in the constitution and the state of Pakistan and is resolved in its objective of imposing *Sharia* in the country. The TTP targets the local people of the tribal districts as well as the state's security personnel and remains a largely peripheral political actor with whom a majority of Pakistanis do not identify themselves. This peripherality of religious extremism has now transformed and is traversing the core of the Pakistani state and society.

This is in the shape of the rise of a new religious political actor, the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, which is situated not in the periphery but in the core of the Pakistani society and also the state.<sup>21</sup> The rise of the TLP, the glaring ascendancy of the blasphemy discourse and with it a populist religious rhetoric that they represent which revolves around protecting the honour and dignity of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) defines their non-intellectual, rhetorical politics. Opposed to the TTP which seeks a revolutionary path to overthrow the status quo through an armed rebellion, the TLP's religious agenda takes blasphemy laws and discourse as the heart and soul of the Pakistani Muslim. This politics is now gaining increased traction as evidenced in the last two general elections. In the 2018 elections, the TLP received 2.13 million votes elevating them to the fifth largest political party in the country in terms of votes received while in the 2024 elections, the party improved their vote share to 2.89 million and also their status as Pakistan's fourth largest political party with respect to votes received.<sup>22</sup> This rising popularity of the TLP presents a major challenge to social cohesion and peaceful coexistence as the blasphemy discourse specifically targets religious minorities of any persuasion, not necessarily, Ahmedis only and also Muslims. One sees a rising trends in incidents of mob violence where people's emotions and wild passions are unleashed to the point where they are willing to engage in brutal acts of killing. Some recent incidents include: the public lynching of a Sri Lankan factory manager in Sialkot in December 2021,<sup>23</sup> the torching of 26 churches in Jarranwala, Faisalabad in August 2023,<sup>24</sup> assault against the Christian minority in Sargodha in May 2024,<sup>25</sup> the lynching of a Muslim individual in Swat in June 2024<sup>26</sup> and two recent incidents in Quetta<sup>27</sup> and Umerkot<sup>28</sup> in September 2024 where individuals (both

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<sup>20</sup> Mary Hunter, 'Recent challenges to the rights of the Ahmadiyyah community,' *Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research*, December 2, 2024, <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/politics-governance/recent-challenges-to-the-rights-of-the-ahmadiyyah-community/>

<sup>21</sup> Hassan Javid, 'The Limits of Possibilities of Religious Politics: The Case of the Tehreek-i-Labbaik in Pakistani Punjab,' *Sociological Bulletin* 70, no. 4 (2021): 502-521; Ahmad Sabat, Muhammad Shoaib and Abdul Qadar, 'Religious Populism in Pakistani Punjab: How Khadim Rizvi's Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan emerged,' *International Area Studies Review* 23, no. 4 (2020): 365-381; Abdul Basit, 'Barelvi Political Activism and Religious Mobilization in Pakistan: The case of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP),' *Politics, Religion and Ideology* 21, no. 3 (2020): 374-389.

<sup>22</sup> 'A total of 2.89 million voted for TLP in the 2024 elections, 0.76 million more compared to the 2018 elections,' *Gallup Pakistan*, March 12, 2024, <https://gallup.com.pk/post/36181>

<sup>23</sup> 'Sri Lankan factory manager lynched and set on fire in Pakistan,' *Al-Jazeera*, December 3, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/3/sri-lankan-factory-manager-lynched-and-set-on-fire-in-pakistan>

<sup>24</sup> Asif Aqeel and Brian Isaac Asaph, 'After 26 churches burned, Pakistan Christians brace for more blasphemy accusations,' *Christianity Today*, August 23, 2023, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2023/08/pakistan-church-attack-blasphemy-tlp-faisalabad-jaranwala/>

<sup>25</sup> Imran Gabol, '44 identified, booked for Sargodha mob attack on Christian man,' *Dawn*, May 26, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1835823>

<sup>26</sup> 'Swat police station torched, man lynched for 'blasphemy,' *Dawn*, June 21, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1840942>

<sup>27</sup> Nadir Guramani, 'Quetta police official allegedly kills blasphemy suspect in jail,' *Dawn*, September 12, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1858556>

<sup>28</sup> Nadir Guramani, 'Umerkot doctor accused of blasphemy shot dead in 'encounter': police,' *Dawn*, September 19, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1859836>

Muslims) were killed by the police as a response to an enraged mob demanding the accused be handed over to them for mob justice.

These incidents are indicative of a rising pattern of religious majoritarian violence seeping through Pakistani society and a key challenge for social cohesion and stability moving forward. The appropriation of an intolerant blasphemy politics injurious to peaceful coexistence is not only the work of societal actors but is now being normalised and routinised by the Pakistani state institutionally through legal mechanisms. This is evident in a recent law which amended the blasphemy laws to increase the minimum punishment for anyone who disrespects sacred personalities including Ummahatul Momineen, Ahl-e-Bait, Khulfa-e-Rashideen and Sahaba-e-Kiram from three to ten years along with a fine of Rs. 1 million.<sup>29</sup> The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) expressed its dissatisfaction stating that, 'Given Pakistan's troubled record of the misuse of such laws, these amendments are likely to be weaponised disproportionately against religious minorities and sects, resulting in false FIRs, harassment and persecution. Moreover, increasing the penalty for alleged blasphemy will aggravate misuse of the law to settle personal vendettas, as is often the case with blasphemy allegations.'<sup>30</sup>

#### **4. Identity politics: an empathetic view**

Is identity-based politics a problem or challenge for national unity? Does identity-based politics deepens divisions within society and is it inimical to national integration? One of the reasons why identity politics transforms into a protracted conflict relates to the inability of state elites to fathom why identity politics emerges in the first place. More importantly, when minority ethnic groups mobilise politically or engage in violent militancy directed against the state, state response is usually directed against the violence or politically motivated slogans of the underrepresented ethnic minority. The attention to violence and non-attention to political, economic and social deprivations that incentivizes political mobilization and/or violent insurgency is the bane of the problem in addressing the plight of ethnic minorities. This repeated cycle of violence without attending to the primary grievances has resulted in a fifth insurgency in Balochistan.<sup>31</sup> This insurgency in recent years has seen the recruitment of female suicide bombers,<sup>32</sup> the increased and high-profile targeting of state's sensitive security installations in Noshki and Panjgur,<sup>33</sup> as well as Lasbela,<sup>34</sup> the brutal killing of non-Baloch settlers and workers from

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<sup>29</sup> 'Blasphemy law amendment to create room for persecution,' *Express Tribune*, January 20, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2396990/blasphemy-law-amendment-to-create-room-for-persecution-hrcp>

<sup>30</sup> 'Blasphemy law amendment to create room for persecution,' *Express Tribune*.

<sup>31</sup> Farhan Hanif Siddiqi, 'Political Economy of the Ethnonationalist Uprising in Pakistani Balochistan, 1999-2013,' in Matthew Web and Albert Wijeweera (eds.), *The Political Economy of Conflict in South Asia* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 57-74.

<sup>32</sup> Abdul Basit, 'Women suicide bombers and the changing trajectories of Pakistan's Baloch insurgency,' *New Lines Magazine*, December 14, 2023, <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/women-suicide-bombers-and-the-changing-trajectories-of-pakistans-baloch-insurgency/>

<sup>33</sup> 'Pakistan army posts come under deadly attacks in Balochistan,' *Al Jazeera*, February 2, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/2/attacks-on-army-posts-kill-4-gunmen-soldier-in-pakistan>

<sup>34</sup> Imtiaz Baloch, 'Dozens killed, roads paralyzed as Balochistan faces wave of attacks,' *The Khorasan Diary*, August 26, 2024, <https://thekhorasandiary.com/en/2024/08/26/dozens-killed-roads-paralyzed-as-balochistan-faces--wave-of-attacks>

other provinces,<sup>35</sup> the suicide bombing targeting Chinese citizens in Karachi<sup>36</sup> and a suicide bombing at the Quetta train station.<sup>37</sup>

In the neighbouring Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, a fresh wave of TTP militancy has seen an upsurge after the Taliban regime came to power in Afghanistan. After August 2021, terrorist attacks in Pakistan increased from 267 in 2021 to 365 in 2022.<sup>38</sup> Besides the militancy, a new social movement by the name of Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) has made increased headway in the former tribal districts. The PTM emerged in the wake of the brutal killing of Naqeebullah Mehsud in Karachi, the son of a local businessman and aspiring model, in police custody. Naqeebullah's death combined with a sense of ethnic profiling of the Pashtuns as violent religious militants contributed to the movement's rise. PTM, in the tradition of Bacha Khan's pacifist politics, brands itself as a political movement. It believes in non-violence and agitational politics within the ambit of the constitution. In this sense, the PTM does not stand outside the constitution – as does the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan – but is conveniently ensconced within it.<sup>39</sup> The rise in PTM's agitational politics can be explained by the fact that traditional Pashtun ethnic parties, specially the ANP and Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PKMAP) did not raise their voices against the state's excesses in the tribal periphery. The PTM, on the other hand, remains decisively uncompromising in retaining its critical discourse on the state and the military unless the latter institutes policies that benefit the locals. In an interview, Manzoor Pashteen argued, "Once our objectives are achieved, I will go home and don't make any noise. We just want peace."<sup>40</sup> Recently, the PTM organised a Grand Pashtun Jirga in order to outline a collective Pashtun voice and make demands on the state. The final declaration called on both the military and the militants to withdraw from the province within two months barring which the Jirga will decide on how to remove them through their own efforts.<sup>41</sup>

Given this heightened state of insurgency and unrest in Balochistan and KP, the state's response is primarily kinetic in nature while at the same time that it fails to appreciate why the Baloch and Pashtuns engage in a heated vitriol against the state. In Balochistan, the state continues to see local protests such as ones led by Dr. Mahrang Baloch as 'a proxy of terrorist organisations and criminal mafias'<sup>42</sup> without sensitizing themselves to the fact that the protesting Baloch are also Pakistani citizens who are addressing the state for the resolution of their grievances. On the other hand, the state's response to the PTM has been to ban it on account of the movement posing a "significant danger" to public order and

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<sup>35</sup> Farhat Javed and George Wright, 'At least 22 killed after having IDs checked in Pakistan,' *BBC News*, August 26, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c3w671eng9go>

<sup>36</sup> Adil Jawad and Munir Ahmed, 'A Pakistani separatist group claims bombing that killed 2 Chinese near Karachi airport,' *Associated Press*, October 7, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/pakistan-karachi-explosion-bla-chinese-killed-38cddd2b80b066b1194872dc45e954e1> According to the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), 20 Chinese citizens have been killed and 34 injured in terrorist attacks in Pakistan since 2021. Sanaullah Khan, '20 Chinese citizens killed, 34 injured in 14 terrorist attacks since 2021: Nacta,' *Dawn*, December 10, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1877910>

<sup>37</sup> Saadullah Akhter, 'Bloodbath': Railway station bombing in Quetta, Pakistan leaves 26 dead,' *Al Jazeera*, November 9, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/11/9/bloodbath-railway-station-bombing-in-quetta-pakistan-leaves-26-dead>

<sup>38</sup> Shahzad Akhtar and Zahid Shahab Ahmed, 'Understanding the resurgence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan,' *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 16, no. 3 (2023): 285-306.

<sup>39</sup> SherShah Atif, 'Manzoor Pashteen: Our protest is non-violent and constitutional,' *Al Jazeera*, April 9, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/4/9/manzoor-pashteen-our-protest-is-non-violent-and-constitutional>

<sup>40</sup> Shah Meer Baloch, 'Manzoor Pashteen: 'Pashtuns are fed up with war,' *DW*, November 4, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistans-manzoor-pashteen-pashtuns-are-fed-up-with-war/a-43336984>

<sup>41</sup> Arif Hayat, 'PTM jirga demands withdrawal of militants from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa,' *Dawn*, October 14, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1865183>

<sup>42</sup> 'Baloch Yakjehti Committee is a proxy of terrorist organisations, DG ISPR says,' *Business Recorder*, August 5, 2024, <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40315989>



safety in the country.<sup>43</sup> This approach to resolving Baloch and Pashtun grievances from an ideational perspective stems from viewing ethnic activists from a purely ethnic identity frame while failing to acknowledge and accept their Pakistani identity. This entails not a vindictive, but an empathetic view, of identity politics which is steeped in understanding the deep sense of deprivation and alienation which incites ethnic minorities to then engage in protests and/or violence. The purpose is not to dismiss identity politics in a negative light for this entails a rejection of diversity but to harness this diversity into the nation-building project by attending to local political, economic and social grievances.

## **5. Youth bulge, social media, disinformation and fake news**

Polarization is the Merriam-Webster's dictionary word of 2024 which is defined as 'division into two sharply distinct opposites; especially, a state in which the opinions, beliefs, or interests of a group or society no longer range along a continuum but become concentrated at opposing extremes.'<sup>44</sup> As societies across the Global North and Global South contend with increased polarization, a hardening of political views and a lesser tendency towards accepting alternative opinions, social media forums provide avenues for the rapid airing of misinformation and disinformation which contribute to polarization. American sociologists in the 1980s were concerned about the declining rate of political participation of ordinary Americans and that they were much more interested in sitting at home and watching TV, and largely disinterested in politics, voting as well as participating in voluntary associations.<sup>45</sup> Contrary to Putnam's views on declining social capital and collective action within the American public, societies across the world are in the throes of social media which provides space for an exaggerated political consciousness – not always politically correct but appealing nonetheless to partisans across the political spectrum – where citizens political and social awareness and the relevant information are easily available. It is not the question of an easily available information but the manner in which it is made available is a huge challenge as hate speech, disinformation and misinformation makes its way without being regulated. So, today people do not merely sit at home watching TV as uninterested citizens in everyday politics but are increasingly hooked into the digital information highway where they are forming (un)informed political and other opinions which they resolutely believe in.

This is combined with a younger generation of tech-savvy and social media influencers who tend to bend political, economic, social, cultural and religious opinions to their personal whims and in the process polarize society. There is a lot of talk today of a near super-majority of a younger population (64%) in Pakistan below the age of 30 with a critical mass of little over 29% making up the between 15 and 29 age bracket, defined as the youth.<sup>46</sup> This youth bulge is an asset but can only be seen as such if the state provides the necessary socio-political and socio-economic dividends for which this younger generation of Pakistanis yearn. These include the right to peaceful political participation, quality education and health, transportation infrastructure, decent housing and living conditions and, jobs and employment opportunities. According to the UNDP, only a meagre 6% out of the 64% receive higher education while more than one quarter (29%) do not receive any education at all with only 4% of the country's youngsters actively pursuing employment while 57% of the youth remained out of touch when it comes to seeking employment.<sup>47</sup> As the youth feels disappointed with a non-supply of essential public

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<sup>43</sup> 'Govt imposes ban on Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement,' *Dawn*, October 7, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1863545>

<sup>44</sup> Kalhan Rosenblatt, 'Merriam-Webster names 'polarization' its 2024 word of the year,' *NBC News*, December 10, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/merriam-webster-word-of-the-year-2024-polarization-rcna183431>

<sup>45</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

<sup>46</sup> Shakeel Ahmad, 'Unleashing the potential of a young Pakistan,' *UNDP Human Development Reports*, July 24, 2018, <https://hdr.undp.org/content/unleashing-potential-young-pakistan>

<sup>47</sup> 'UNDP highlights disparities facing youth bulge,' *The Express Tribune*, August 28, 2023, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2432780/undp-highlights-disparities-facing-youth-bulge>

goods, this results in an agitated social environment often expressed in the social media where the youth express their frustrations. It is imperative for national unity then that the rising expectations and aspirations of the younger generation are attended to including also the breakdown of traditional authority patterns and an intensifying economic crisis.<sup>48</sup>

## **6. Institutional mechanisms: local governments and civil participation**

Do local governments provide better opportunity for civic engagement? This relates to the decentralization and devolution of political institutions for centralization only creates a lot of power at the top at the same time that it takes these administrative powers away from localities and peripheries at the bottom. The 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment and the 7<sup>th</sup> National Finance Commission (NFC) Award provides opportunities for deepening the political process at the bottom through the principle of self-rule and shared rule.<sup>49</sup> While largely positive, the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment has not seen the transfer of power further down to the local government as the provincial governments in all the four provinces are not interested in sharing powers with local stakeholders.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, the 7<sup>th</sup> NFC Award achieved a major milestone by outlining a novel financial distribution formula between the centre and provinces on the other hand and between the provinces on the other. However, subsequent talks on a new financial distribution formula have failed to come to fruition.<sup>51</sup> Given these lacuna, there has been a push-back against the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment and the 7<sup>th</sup> NFC Award as contributing to the weakening of the Pakistani state at the same time that it has made provinces much more financially powerful.<sup>52</sup>

In order for national unity and diversity-acceptant political culture and practice to take root in the country, it is imperative that the federal, power-sharing formula be strengthened as opposed to being weakened or curtailed. This is because political participation at the provincial and local government levels incentivizes citizens to become part of the political process in order to resolve their everyday problems. Centralization of power in Pakistan has had the negative impact of heightening the ethnic security dilemma (increase in the centre's power has the effect of minimizing power and security for peripheral ethnic groups). It is essential then to consolidate democracy and federalism over the longer term future so that a wider group of citizens are socialized as active political participants.

## **Policy recommendations**

The following policy recommendations are put forward to realise the objective of unity in diversity:

1. From an ideational perspective, the discourse of a Pakistani national identity requires a new template that is rooted in the objective of diversity-acceptance. Diversity-acceptance as the core norm is a fundamental imperative in order to guarantee social cohesion and peaceful coexistence between different ethnic and religious minorities.
2. A Pakistani person, of necessity, is not composed of a singular, unitary national identity but multiple identities including ethnic, religious, sectarian, provincial, class, familial and human. Thus, the world view informing the meaning of the Pakistani citizen needs to be broadened to include space for alternate identities. In this case, a civic as opposed to an ethnocentric epistemology should be the guiding principle of the Pakistani citizen.
3. National identity often assumes a totalitarian project which prides on exclusivity and in essence denies recognition for Others, that is, people who do not share similar cultural, religious,

<sup>48</sup> Adeel Malik and Maya Tudor, 'Pakistan's coming crisis,' *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 3 (2024): 69-83.

<sup>49</sup> Daniel Elazar, *Exploring Federalism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987).

<sup>50</sup> Asmat Kakar, 'Local government and Pakistan's reluctant elite,' *LSE South Asia Blog*, March 16, 2017, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2017/03/16/local-governments-and-pakistans-reluctant-political-elite/>

<sup>51</sup> Shahbaz Rana, 'NFC's term ends without award,' *The Express Tribune*, April 28, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2208682/nfcs-term-ends-without-award>

<sup>52</sup> 'Bajwa doctrine's scope limited to security measures only, clarifies DG ISPR,' *Dawn*, March 28, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1398064>

linguistic attributes. It is imperative for Pakistan that the idea of national identity should be 'humanistic' in its orientation. Diversity-acceptance as a fundamental principle of the Pakistani national identity can only make headway if the 'human' is accorded value not only the 'national/citizen.'

4. Rising religious majoritarianism presents a serious threat to civic engagement and social cohesion as it breeds an intolerant, exclusivist ethos as evidenced in increased incidents of mob lynching. State authorities need to present a more assertive stance in preventing such violence by sanctioning individuals and groups that target minorities for political gains.
5. In a world of social media where misinformation and disinformation is widespread, it is imperative that a younger generation of Pakistanis are well versed about how hate speech and fake news contribute to violence against minorities. In particular, social media platforms contribute to a polarized political environment as partisan voices dominate the digital space. It is imperative then that truth and fact-based journalism is promoted on social media platforms so that deliberate conspiracy theories and disinformation are minimised and countered. Through a regular promotion of a truth and fact-based journalism, social media users will be better sensitized to question any information that passes them as true or otherwise, as opposed to a blind belief in it as necessarily true.
6. Diversity-acceptance, social cohesion and the larger objective of unity in diversity can only be consolidated if citizens are provided political participation and representation. In this regard, the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment provides an institutional and constitutional roadmap of power-sharing between the different provincial units of the country as well as the possibility of devolving power down to the local government. It is important that this roadmap is strengthened in the future as power devolved is power retained. Moreover, power-sharing ensures satisfactory political outcomes as voices of the citizenry are included in political processes while denial only increases a frustrated citizenry.



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