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STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION: A CASE STUDY OF BALOCHISTAN, PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This study examines the Baloch insurgency in Pakistan through the intersecting lenses of recognition, justice, and the shift from realist to constructivist approaches. Its purpose is to explain the insurgency beyond conventional security and economic frameworks by showing how structural, cultural, and psychological exclusion shape Baloch grievances. The study draws on Nancy Fraser's concepts of misrecognition and maldistribution and Axel Honneth's notion of moral injury to analyze how state policies have denied the Baloch recognition as full citizens with a respected identity. As a critical review article, the paper employs a theory-guided qualitative analysis of purposively selected secondary sources, including peer-reviewed scholarship, policy reports on the 18th Amendment and CPEC, official statistics, and Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reports. The analysis covers the period from 1948 to 2024. The analysis indicates that the insurgency has been driven not only by resource disputes, political marginalization, and uneven development, but also by experiences of invisibility, disrespect, and moral injury associated with the exploitative use of Baloch gas and mineral resources. The results indicate that a narrow focus on security and material distribution is insufficient to explain the conflict's persistence. These results reframe the conflict as a struggle over both resources and dignity rather than a purely security-centered insurgency. The study concludes that durable peace in Balochistan requires a justice-oriented framework combining redistribution with recognition. It recommends that policymakers address material inequality, political exclusion, identity-based grievances, and demands for dignity and inclusion in order to advance sustainable conflict resolution and long-term peace.

Keywords: Baloch insurgency, recognition, justice, moral injury, redistribution.

Review Article

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1. INTRODUCTION

Balochistan is a very large province that encompasses approximately half the territory of Pakistan, 44%, and is identified as the epicenter of an ongoing conflict. This region has mineral resources and gas in abundance, making Balochistan a valuable or priceless area. Its coast along the Arabian Sea also makes it very important, particularly owing to projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), regarding which, concerns and questions have emerged as to what extent or in what way it might be beneficial for Balochistan or the province (Masomy, 2025). For decades, the Baloch people and the Pakistan state have been caught up in and constrained by the pervasive conflict resulting from uprising, state repression, and lack of trust (Samad, 2014). Ever since 1948, the Baloch have been battling for their independence, and it has resulted in several armed uprising protests. This has proved to have a catastrophic effect, with entire communities destroyed, lives taken, and many people missing (ACLED, 2020). The presence of a prolonged conflict has maintained a separatist movement that still promotes right to self-determination (Ali, 2024).

The Balochistan dispute usually receives analyses from three different points of view. Firstly, it can be analyzed for its geo-economic angle, which concentrates on resource extraction and other CPEC projects. Secondly, it can be analyzed for its security angle, which concentrates on counter-insurgency operations and enforced disappearance cases. Thirdly, it has been observed that it receives little attention for its ethno-nationalist narrative point of view (Ejaz & Rehman, 2022). Such views capture some facets of this conflict but fail to address its causes in a comprehensive manner. The purpose of this article is to point out that the struggle in Balochistan is primarily about dignity and identity. The Pakistani state has failed to take notice of the history, culture, and rights of the Baloch people which had given rise to feelings of discontent and struggle in Balochistan. The Baloch people want their identity to be taken note of and recognized rather than merely their territory and resources.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The yearning of Baloch nationals for self-determination is not a newly emerged demand. It is deeply rooted in the decades' long history of fighting for autonomy which determines that distinct national identity serves not only as an instrument of political mobilization but also as a cultural cohesion to influence political actions and to provide social or cultural stability (Baloch, 1987). To understand Baloch identity, one must accept it as a preserved, evolved and sustained identity rather than a static identity by keeping in mind the contested and struggling history of this conflict (Hassan & Jan, 2024). Sometimes, when a state creates strategies for a homogenous or unified identity to strengthen the societal or political image, it backfires because in the whole process, any single or maybe few other identities which are in minority gets neglected and eventually the neglected identity begins to struggle for survival and recognition (Khan & Laoutides, 2024). The rhetoric of opposition to the state emerges when the minority starts feeling marginalized or excluded from economic, political and social rights (Hashmi, 2015).

The Baloch insurgency is often viewed, by various analysts and Baloch activists, as a form of "internal colonialism" where state of Pakistan is treating Balochistan as a colony by using its natural resources for the development and benefit of other regions and provinces, and ethnic cores while leaving the Balochistan underdeveloped and Baloch people marginalized (Khan, 2005). The most evident instance for this unfair treatment of Balochistan is the deprivation and inaccessibility to gas in majority of the local areas of Balochistan, although being a producer of natural gas. Development projects of Pakistan like Gwadar Port and China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) have added the fuel to the decades' long grievances of Baloch nationals because instead of utilizing

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these projects for the benefit and inclusion of these locals, foreign workers have been prioritized (Grare, 2013). Therefore, many local residents perceive projects associated with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as primarily benefiting capitalist elites while relegating ethnic minority communities to a subordinate socioeconomic position (Janusz, 2022). This exclusion of locals laid the basis for the mistrust between the Pakistani state and Baloch nationals because the promise of more provincial self-autonomous right by the government, according to the 18th Amendment, could not be implemented successfully or rightfully. Baloch nationals view this as a betrayal and justify their struggle which includes violence too (Khan & Sherbaz, 2025).

The feeling of exclusion, ignorance, marginalization and deprivation experienced by Balochistan's locals has changed the face of Baloch insurgency from merely about resources or money to gaining respect, equality and fairness. Axel Honneth explains that social conflicts like this take place when people are denied their legal rights and social inclusion, they come up in formally organized movements and groups to claim recognition and to gain respect (Honneth, 1995). Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth suggest that there must be two angles to be looked upon to deal with such ethnic conflicts. These two angles involve the factors of looking at how these people are economically disadvantaged and how they are ethnically disrespected. In this case of Balochistan, the locals here face both issues; misrecognition and maldistribution, which tend to be the primary interconnected sources of injustice and unfairness (Panigassi, 2021). The equality people enjoy and deserve in economic, political and social spheres of their lives is what described as parity of participation by Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 1998) and this severely and primarily lacks in the case of Balochistan. The common events like enforced disappearances (Amnesty International, 2024) becoming a routine and intentional targeting of human rights activists like Mahrang Baloch, blurs and dilutes the line of right and wrong and technically becomes disrespect and denial of basic human, social, political and economic rights of Baloch people (O'Brien, 2025). Due to these issues, Baloch struggle has become severe, extreme, more persistent and violent.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study applies Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser's theories. Honneth is of the view that cultural disrespect leads to conflict and therefore people need respect for their identities to be acknowledged, whereas Fraser focuses on fixing economic inequalities (McNay, 2008). By looking at both recognition and redistribution, this framework helps explain how cultural and economic injustices together drive ethnopolitical conflicts, such as those seen in Balochistan.

Axel Honneth's theory says that recognition is needed for self-realization. It helps people to have a positive self-image. This idea is explained in his book, *The Struggle for Recognition* (Heidegren, 2002). According to Honneth, people need three forms of recognition i.e. love, rights and social esteem. Love gives emotional security, rights give moral respect and social esteem values a person's contributions and abilities. Without these, individuals face disrespect and misrecognition. This leads to social struggles for having and getting recognition and dignity. Honneth says that personal identity is closely linked to social recognition, which makes it central to understand conflicts rooted in issues of respect and identity. The refusal to recognize individuals in these three forms, known as misrecognition, not only causes emotional harm but also causes deep moral harm. Often, it stimulates people to come together in the form of resistance and acting in a political manner in order to gain their rights and dignity (Pilapil, 2013). When discussing Balochistan, denial of political rights and disregard for their cultural identity are examples of misrecognition. The separatist struggle has now become a moral struggle through this process

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because people are fighting for their dignity as a community.

Axel Honneth highlights the moral and ethical harm caused by misrecognition, while Nancy Fraser adds a critical perspective by connecting recognition to economic justice. Fraser argues that injustice involves economic inequality (maldistribution) and cultural domination (misrecognition). She stresses that social struggles must address both economic redistribution and cultural recognition for fairness (Fraser, 1995). Fraser's ultimate normative ideal is "parity of participation" where people interact as equals (Lovell, 2007). This framework helps understand Balochistan's situation because the province's issues clearly reflect its two components. Firstly, there is economic exploitation, inequality and poverty, despite Balochistan's vast natural resources. Secondly, the lack of recognition, also termed as the disregard and lack of political rights by the Baloch community.

These elements or factors taken altogether would explain the economic troubles and cultural-political issues surrounding the conflict in the region or province. The Baloch struggle is essentially based on claims for economic justice cum cultural justice. There is a desire for a balanced sharing of resources generated from the rich natural resources found in the Baloch province so that the historical economic oppression and poverty could be alleviated. At the same time, it is a struggle that demands that cultural politics for the Baloch be recognized in order to correct the established conventions of the state regarding the status of the Baloch in the country, namely being unequal members in the national body (van den Brink, 2010).

4. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 THE BEGINNING OF PAKISTANI BALOCH'S GRIEVANCES

Accession to Pakistan itself has a very complicated history: on 27 March 1948, the princely state of Kalat declared accession to Pakistan under intense negotiations despite resistance by some local leaders. For many Baloch, it was a loss of freedom and identity that his Khanate has built over the history. Its early nationalists were striving to keep a distinct identity for Balochistan, yet they felt ignored. A sense of injustice drove decades of anger and revolt (Breseeg, 2004). This is because a failure to uphold a promise concerning autonomy, as well as the rejection of the provincial administration, created a basis for resentment among the people of Balochistan towards the Pakistani state. This is a right that was first promised but has instead been violated (The Balochistan Post, 2024).

One of the severe grievances faced by Balochistan is economic exclusion or unequal distribution. It is the largest province of Pakistan, extremely rich in natural resources, but deeply underprivileged. Though Balochistan contains the rich resources of Sui gas fields, the profits go to other provinces as well, leaving Balochistan underdeveloped. Consequently, Balochistan remains the poorest province of Pakistan, with about 70% of its population below the poverty line and ranks at the bottom on national HDI indicators on regular basis (Ahmed, 2023). This problem was exacerbated by the lack of good infrastructure, good healthcare, and good levels of education, which have ensured that this region remains poor and underdeveloped (Safdar, 2024; Ahmadzai, 2025). The economic exclusion of Balochistan is a clear case of unequal distribution whereby economic policies produce deprivation and marginalization. This generates resentment and reinforces the nationalist belief that Balochistan is treated as a colony, with its wealth exploited and people ignored. This leads to deep-seated grievances and feelings of injustice, driving conflicts and demands for autonomy (Hani & Ali, 2025).

Another major grievance on which the entire article stands is the grievance of misrecognition. It is because the Pakistani government is trying to bring a uniform national identity through religious or

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linguistic adaptation with little success in Balochistan. This is because there is a strong element of ethnic nationalism along with the feeling that the Baloch culture is being deliberately kept down (Murtaza & Imroze, 2025). The state's promotion of Urdu as the language to be compulsorily taught in the school curriculum and the patronization of religious institutions in their attempt to impose a more restricted form of Islam have all contributed to induce a sense of cultural oppression among the citizens (Talpur, 2023). This misrecognition causes harm to the identity of the Baloch people and is thus used as fuel for their resistance. The usual responses by the state are related to the military, extra-judicial actions like enforced disappearances-each one an act of disrespect and denial of the right to life (Amnesty International, 2020) and the idea of calling nationalist movements as "anti-state," further deepens the sense of being treated as inferiors or as subordinates, and not as equals as citizens. The national integration of the state is being obstructed by the state's attitude. This fosters the need for the Baloch as a separate entity, based upon its unique culture and identity (Gopalan, 2022).

4.2 THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION: MALDISTRIBUTION IN BALOCHISTAN

4.2.1 NANCY FRASER'S MALDISTRIBUTION

According to Fraser, maldistribution encompasses socioeconomic injustices such as exploitation, economic marginalization, and deprivation, all of which prevent individuals and groups from participating in society as equals. In other words, it is not a matter of people being poor; rather, it is the way in which the economic system prevents some people from being equal members of society (Fraser, 1998: 7-8). By being allocated services and resources that are channelled not to their benefit but to satisfy external or elite interests, such communities fall into a cycle of marginalization that is characterized by the disparity that Fraser sees as an inherent disregard for social justice.

4.2.2 CPEC AND TOP-DOWN APPROACH

In the context of Balochistan, such large-scale development projects as CPEC are one of the major examples of maldistribution according to Fraser. CPEC typically involves a top-down developmental model of planning in favor of Chinese investors as well as the federal government of Pakistan instead of Baloch nationals.

Some scholars suggest that not only has the CPEC failed as a means of reducing poverty, but it has also become a burden on Pakistan's unity. The reason behind that is it focuses on the benefits of the elite class (Mihrullah et al., 2025). This economic marginalization is also accompanied by the presence of a large security apparatus. The advent of the Special Security Division (SSD) is a testament to the securitization of development in Balochistan, where the military has dramatically altered the dynamics of the relationship between the state and its people. This security agenda has also resulted in mass displacement of communities who are displaced to make space for the development of infrastructure that is part of the CPEC package. Moreover, the visibility of such security apparatuses has also resulted in a lack of civilian control over development allocations (Wani, 2023). Most critically, it has marginalized Baloch people throughout by considering them as 'security risks' to be 'managed' rather than as principal beneficiaries of the Corridor, thus exacerbating their alienation and unrest.

4.2.3 CASE STUDY: GWADAR PORT

The Port Project in Gwadar is an extreme example of maldistribution, as it has led to "internal colonization" as a result of which the region along the coast has been made a crown jewel for CPEC. By focusing on elitist development through infrastructure projects such as this port development initiative, it has resulted in those public communal resources being turned into limited access zones, thus denies the locals their traditional livelihood options by making their

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fishing grounds in limited access zones (Baloch, 2021). The economic alienation is also accompanied by a "misrecognition" of the identity of the Baloch people. The development paradigm does not consider the culture of the people. The presence of the indigenous people is also viewed as a security problem rather than people equal in their rights. This is why the resilience of the Baloch insurgency is maintained because a lack of equal participation in economic development is a hindrance to the stability of the region.

4.3 THE CULTURAL DIMENSION: MISRECOGNITION

The Balochistan conflict is intricately intertwined within the framework of identity and recognition and can be viewed through two sociological perspectives namely, Axel Honneth's 'Struggle for Recognition' which states that struggle is inherent and almost natural if and when there is a lack or disregard by the state within a particular identity, and 'Misrepresentation' by Nancy Fraser, where there is a constrained voice within the political discourse that obstructs their being treated equitably as peers within their relevant sociopolitical realms and domains because it is a clear reflection that it is not just a battle over resources, but rather a complete absence within their realms within which their 'us vs. them' is set into motion by their disregard within that 'Baloch' identity by their homeland itself within such realms.

A homogeneous and uniting approach by the Pakistani state has systematically disregarded Baloch representation with the consequent impact of "othering," further solidifying a provisional "us vs them" divide with ethnic identity being fashioned in a protective response to marginalization (Hassan & Jan, 2024). Owing to these concerns, a cultural resistance is observed, where the emphasis on the Baloch language and traditional costumes becomes a means of stating a claim for a separate identity that is equally recognized. Moreover, the fact that the state has always maintained the monopoly of political representation through the traditional leaders or Sardars contributes to the mere appearance of inclusivity, which silences the rising voices of the youth and the middle-class segment of the population, as described by Nancy Fraser as the 'profound' loss of political influence and participation (Fraser, 2005).

The making of Gwadar Deep Water Port, the CPEC flagship project, powerfully resonates with these theories as the state's celebration of a national economic milestone clashes with the local experience of "misrecognition"; amid the inflow of billions of dollars' worth of investment in this region, the local Baloch, traditionally dependent on small-scale fishing, fear demographic displacement, and see the construction of restricted "security zones" and an influx of an alien workforce as testimonies to being "othered" on their ancestral soil. The sense of alienation is further accentuated by what Nancy Fraser describes as 'misrepresentation' since the policy-formulation and decision-making powers regarding Gwadar are still largely in the hands of Islamabad or Sardars loyal to the government, thus bypassing altogether grass root movements such as Haq-Do Tehreek or Give Rights Movement. This, in effect, is a lack of representation in decision making with such monumental physical expansion in terms of infrastructure at the harbor, and thus this belief is cemented in being mere spectators in their province, not actually being a stakeholder in their own advancement.

4.4 THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND MORAL COST OF BALOCH MASSES: DISRESPECT

The psychological consequences of state repression can be understood through the concept of moral injury. Honneth (1995: 133) argues that the denial of rights and social ostracism involve "the forcible restriction of personal autonomy" and the denial of one's status as a "full-fledged partner to

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interaction". Similarly, Giles (2020) associates this form of psychological suffering with a serious violation of personal autonomy. When a state systematically denies recognition to a particular group, it undermines not only that group's legal status but also the self-respect of its members, which is closely connected to how they are treated by public institutions.

In Balochistan, coercive state practices, particularly enforced disappearances, have been justified as measures intended to maintain security and counter the activities of the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA). However, such practices may also affect individuals who are not involved in militant activity (Samad, 2014). This creates a broader mechanism of disrespect through which the moral and psychological harm experienced by direct victims extends to their families and communities.

These practices can generate a shared sense of insecurity, humiliation, and devaluation that transcends existing tribal and political divisions. They may also weaken public confidence in the state's capacity to act as a fair mediator and protector (Khoso, 2024). As institutional trust declines, some members of the affected communities may increasingly turn to defensive mobilization in an effort to protect their identity, rights, and autonomy (Giles, 2020).

The case of Abdul Hafeez Baloch provides a concrete example of these moral and psychological consequences. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP, 2022, para. 1), Baloch, a postgraduate student at Quaid-e-Azam University, was allegedly abducted in Khuzdar while volunteering at a local school. His disappearance removed him from ordinary legal protections and prevented him from exercising his fundamental rights. The uncertainty surrounding his whereabouts also extended the psychological and moral consequences of the incident beyond the individual victim, affecting his family and the wider community.

This case can be interpreted through Honneth's theory of misrecognition. The denial of legal protection, social respect, and personal dignity restricts individual autonomy and undermines a person's status as an equal participant in social life (Honneth, 1995: 133). Enforced disappearance therefore constitutes not only a violation of legal rights but also a form of moral harm that damages the victim's relationship with society and state institutions.

Concerning the government response and the deterioration of his belief in the governmental institutions, Hafeez resurfaced in police custody only after protracted protests and a hunger strike led by students in Islamabad. First, the authorities offered him trumped-up allegations of terror-links, making it evident how the judicial system might work to the disadvantage of the civilian population. While he did prove his innocence before the law later on, his experience was characterized by racial profiling and lack of justice and is intended to undermine any faith in the governmental institutions in the Baloch youth (Khoso, 2024).

Lastly, this incident in particular launched a massive defensive effort in the region. The Baloch Students Council (BSC) and civilian parties launched countrywide demonstrations, not only in support of Hafeez but to safeguard the basic identity of the Baloch students who are increasingly being targeted irrespective of their neutrality in politics. This highlights how the treatment of an individual gives rise to the collective feeling of humiliation to act together against state-imposed oppression (Samad, 2014).

4.4.1 FROM MARGINALIZATION TO SEPARATISM

The shift from a marginalized society to a separatist movement is a direct response to such a lack of justice. The idea is that if a society is constantly overlooked or dehumanized, it comes to consider independence as a "last resort" for survival (Khoso, 2024).

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In Balochistan, the idea of separateness is not only limited to politics, but it is an ideological response to the lack of proper treatment by the system. Instead, the use of state violence that aims to retain "control" has brought together various divided groups under one umbrella of resistance and has utilized the very shame that the state brought upon them (Samad, 2014).

5. CONCLUSION

The situation in Balochistan reveals a significant gap between the state's understanding of development and the realities experienced by the Baloch population. The persistence of the insurgency demonstrates that the conflict cannot be explained solely in terms of economic deprivation or security concerns. It is also rooted in the erosion of trust, the violation of ethnic and political rights, and the failure to uphold the social contract between the state and its citizens (Khan & Sherbaz, 2025). The effective implementation of the 18th Amendment could have represented the fulfilment of the state's commitment to provincial autonomy; however, its limited implementation has reinforced perceptions of exclusion and betrayal. Similarly, although CPEC was presented as an important opportunity for Pakistan's economic development, many local communities in Balochistan have not experienced its benefits in ways that reflect their needs, livelihoods, and cultural priorities (Ullah & Akhtar, 2024).

The theoretical approaches of Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth demonstrate that maldistribution and misrecognition are interconnected dimensions of injustice and cannot be addressed separately (Bressiani, 2011). In Balochistan, the unequal distribution of resources is compounded by the denial of cultural recognition, political representation, and equal citizenship. Enforced disappearances constitute one of the most serious manifestations of this injustice, as they violate fundamental rights to life, liberty, legal protection, and human dignity. From Honneth's perspective, such practices generate moral injury by undermining both individual autonomy and collective trust in state institutions.

The findings suggest that the state must reconsider its predominantly security-oriented approach to the conflict. Continuing reliance on coercive and militarized strategies risks deepening alienation and encouraging broader sections of Baloch society, including the educated middle class, to support separatist positions (Samad, 2014). De-escalation may therefore depend on the establishment of meaningful provincial autonomy, the recognition of the Baloch people's distinct identity, and their effective participation in political and economic decision-making (Khan et al., 2025).

The persistence of a top-down development model further demonstrates the need for a broader, justice-oriented approach. Novelli et al.'s (2017) 4Rs framework—redistribution, recognition, representation, and reconciliation—offers a useful basis for addressing the structural dimensions of the conflict. In the context of Balochistan, this would require the equitable distribution of natural-resource revenues, recognition of Baloch cultural and political identity, meaningful representation in decisions concerning regional development, and institutional measures aimed at addressing past and continuing human rights violations.

Ultimately, sustainable peace in Balochistan requires the integration of social justice with institutional reform. The state must develop inclusive political and economic structures that recognize local communities as active participants in the development of their province rather than treating them merely as subjects of centrally designed policies. A renewed social contract based on dignity, equality, participation, and accountability may provide a more durable path towards conflict resolution than approaches centred exclusively on security and economic growth (Baloch et al., 2025).

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