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# PAKISTAN

# THE FAULT LINES

**ASHISH SHUKLA**

MP-IDSA MONOGRAPH SERIES

No. 99 MARCH 2026

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## *LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS*

ACII	Advisory Council of Islamic Ideology
AIML	All India Muslim League
ANP	Awami National Party
BLA	Baloch Liberation Army
BLF	Baloch Liberation Front
CDF	Chief of Defence Staff
CJCS	Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee
CMLA	Chief Martial Law Administrator
COAS	Chief of Army Staff
CPEC	China–Pakistan Economic Corridor
DG-ISI	Director General Inter-Services Intelligence
DG-ISPR	Director General Inter-Services Public Relations
EAC	Economic Advisory Council
ECP	Election Commission of Pakistan
EEF	Extended Fund Facility
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Areas
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GCDA	Governance and Corruption Diagnosis Assessment
GDP	Gross Development Product
GHQ	General Headquarters
GNN	Grand National Narrative
IDP	Internally Displaced Persons
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPP	Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party

KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
LeJ	Lashkar-e-Jhangvi
LFS	Labour Force Survey
MQM	Mohajir Quami Movement
MQM-P	Muttahida Quami Movement-Pakistan
MTM	Mehsud Tahafuz Movement
NAB	National Accountability Bureau
NWFP	North West Frontier Province
PBS	Pakistan Bureau of Statistics
PML-N	Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz
PPP	Pakistan People's Party
PTI	Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf
PTIP	Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf Parliamentarian
PTM	Pashtun Tahafuz Movement
SBA	Stand by Arrangement
SIFC	Special Investment Facilitation Council
SMP	Sipah-e-Muhammad Pakistan
SSA	Saraiki Student Alliance
SSP	Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan
SSSC	Saraiki Suba Sang Committee
ST	Sunni Tehreek
STOS	Special and Tactical Operations Squad
TLP	Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan
TNFJ	Tehreek-e-Fiqah-e-Jafari
TTP	Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

## INTRODUCTION

A fault line is generally understood as a crack or fissure that weakens the internal cohesion of an object. In geology, fault lines are breaks in the surface of earth where tectonic plates come in contact or collide with each other. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines a fault line as ‘a problem that may not be obvious and could cause something to fail’, whereas the *Oxford Learner’s Dictionary* refers to it as ‘an issue that people disagree about and may, as a result, lead to conflict’. In the context of a nation state, fault lines often refer to divisive socio-economic, politico-religious and ethno-linguistic issues that have the potential to push a country to the brink of internal conflict. The fault lines in nation states could be both primordially present and artificially created by those inhabiting and governing the territorial space in one way or the other. It would not be an exaggeration to say that modern nation states have some fault lines within their territorial limits that are universal in nature, while others could be the result of human intervention. The mere existence of fault lines in a country does not result in the weakening of the state or its societal fabric. Under ideal situations, societal divisions should not automatically lead to internal conflict and negatively shape the destiny of a nation. However, if the state fails to manage the fault lines effectively, it may widen over time and pave the way for violent conflicts. In the worst-case scenario, these fractures can cause severe and irreversible damage to national unity and stability. In some instances, they may even create opportunities for secessionist movements that could be exploited by adversarial forces within the country and beyond.

Many states in the international system grapple with numerous fault lines, spanning socio-economic, politico-religious and ethno-linguistic divisions. Some have managed the fault lines well to overcome the problems associated with it, while others have allowed them to fester like old wounds. Nations like Australia, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, Switzerland, Singapore, United Kingdom and United States are considered stable and developed today. However,

this has not always been the case, as their modern tranquillity belies brutal conflicts in the past. Many of these nations evolved effective mechanisms to deal with internal strife and divisions. Canada successfully diffused the linguistic fault line through a series of federal policies that established an official bilingualism policy and implemented language rights throughout the country. Official bilingualism, also known as constitutional bilingualism, is hailed as the single most important initiative that helped the federal government in Canada retain its legitimacy in Quebec and undermine the secessionist cause.<sup>1</sup> English and French are the two officially recognised languages; however, there are over 200 other languages that are spoken across the country. Official bilingualism and multiculturalism policies have helped Canada effectively diffuse the country's linguistic fault line.

Switzerland is another example that has managed deep linguistic, religious and cultural divides remarkably well. This was successfully done through decentralisation of power in a system of consociational democracy and extensive use of referendums and citizen initiatives. South Africa transformed itself from an apartheid regime to a multi-racial democracy through reconciliation and constitutional reforms. The South African Freedom Charter categorically says,

We, the people of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know: That South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of the people.<sup>2</sup> The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), set up in 1995, granted about 1500 amnesties for thousands of crimes committed during the apartheid years.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Terence McNamee, 'Managing the Two Solitudes: Lessons from Canada', in Jeffrey Herbst et al. (eds), *On the Fault Line: Managing Tensions and Divisions within Societies*. Profile Books, London, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> The Freedom Charter, 26 June 1955, available at <https://www.anc1912.org.za/the-freedom-charter-2/> (Accessed on 2 January 2024).

<sup>3</sup> Alan S. Mabin and Randolph Vigne, 'Post-apartheid South Africa', *Britannica*, 22 September 2025, available at [www.britannica.com/place/South-Africa/Postapartheid-South-Africa](http://www.britannica.com/place/South-Africa/Postapartheid-South-Africa).

In South Asia, India remains a shining example of managing its internal fault lines pretty well despite a complex and challenging situation. In order to effectively deal with internal fault lines, India relied on the 'Unity in Diversity' framework, which fosters social cohesion by acknowledging and celebrating differences while recognising commonalities and shared values. This was made possible with the help of a solid constitutional framework under which democratic institutions were nourished and strengthened to perform their duties within the limits prescribed by the Constitution. Hardworking and peace-loving Indians collectively proved all those wrong who had written the obituary of India at the time of partition and argued that such a diverse society would find it difficult to remain united. The nation not only survived but has also made tremendous progress in every aspect of human endeavour. Over the years, it has emerged as the third largest economy with regard to Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) and the fourth most powerful military in the world. As an ancient civilisation and an aspiring global power, the nation is making its presence felt at the high tables of the world.

## **THE CURIOUS CASE OF PAKISTAN**

Certain geographical regions shaped by intricate socio-economic as well as politico-security dynamics quite often invite international attention. In the Indian subcontinent, Pakistan stands out as such territory, consistently remaining in regional and international spotlight – often for reasons that are viewed unfavourably by many within and beyond the region. In less than eight decades of its independent existence, the nation has earned numerous controversial distinctions and found itself trapped in a relentless cycle of crises. The responsibility for this predicament lies first with the founding fathers of Pakistan, whose vision was arguably inadequate, and then with the politico-security elites, who steered the nation in directions widely criticised today.

Like most post-colonial nation-states, Pakistan emerged with its own inherent socio-economic, politico-religious and ethno-linguistic fault lines that required careful and patient management. However, instead of fostering national consensus and devising strategies to mitigate these challenges, the ruling Pakistani elites prioritised short-term individualistic goals – further exacerbating internal divisions – over the long-term objectives. By October 1958, Pakistan witnessed at least seven prime

ministers in office. Of these, four were dismissed by the Governor-General/President, one was assassinated and two resigned from their positions under challenging circumstances. The 1956 Constitution, the first of the three Constitutions of Pakistan, marked a democratic milestone. However, its significance was short-lived – President Iskander Mirza dismissed Prime Minister Shaheed Suhrawardy and imposed martial law and appointed Gen. Mohammad Ayub Khan as the Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA). Rather than resolving the crisis and restoring civilian governance, Ayub Khan consolidated power, ruling over a decade – first as CMLA and later as president of Pakistan. During his tenure, a new constitution was introduced in 1962, establishing a federal state with a presidential form of government and unicameral legislatures at federal and provincial levels.<sup>4</sup> The new system focused on the concentration of power in the presidency by granting extensive powers to the president, while limiting the powers of other institutions, including the legislature and judiciary. Such a system was bound to fail in the end.

In his autobiography, *Friends Not Masters*, Gen. Ayub Khan asserted: ‘While we may learn from the experience of others, we have to work out our own solutions and our own salvation’.<sup>5</sup> However, his actions and policies ultimately proved counterproductive for Pakistan. Over time, many of the nation’s existing fault lines deepened, while new fault lines emerged, further complicating its socio-political landscape. This was identified, acknowledged and underlined by a number of Pakistani observers, including Maleeha Lodhi, Farzana Sheikh, Khaled Ahmed and Adil Khan. Maleeha Lodhi even discussed how these fault lines actually shaped Pakistan’s political trajectory and contributed to chronic instability in the country.<sup>6</sup> She went on to underline several

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<sup>4</sup> National Assembly, ‘Parliamentary History of Pakistan’, Government of Pakistan, Islamabad, 2019, available at <https://na.gov.pk/en/content.php?id=75#:~:text=The%20Constitution%20of%201962%20envisaged,and%20in%20provinces%20were%20unicameral> (Accessed on 13 March 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Mohammad Ayub Khan, *Friends Not Masters: A Political Autobiography*, Oxford University Press, London 1967, p. viii.

<sup>6</sup> Maleeha Lodhi, ‘Introduction’, in Maleeha Lodhi (ed.) *Pakistan: The Search for Stability*, Hurst & Company, London, 2024.

structural issues obstructing national progress such as unstable civil–military relations and power imbalance, a political culture steeped in clientelist politics, dependence on borrowed economic growth and foreign bailouts, adversarial relations between central government and the provinces, the strategic use of geography to pursue national security and foreign policy objectives and the appeasement of religious factions alongside tolerance of militant outfits.<sup>7</sup>

Pakistan, at present, is navigating one of the most challenging periods in its history, entangled in a deep and multifaceted crisis with no easy solution in sight. The nation’s social fabric is fraying along linguistic, religious, ethnic and provincial lines. Radical Islamic groups – once supported by the security establishment for specific purposes – are threatening to introduce revolutionary changes in the socio-political landscape of Pakistan by actively supporting violent activities within the country. Despite some improvement in the internal security situation, due to several operations launched by the military in the recent past, vulnerabilities remain static. One can understand the reality from the fact that, out of twenty least vulnerable districts, thirteen are in Punjab, four in Sindh, two in Kyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and none in Balochistan.<sup>8</sup> On the economic front, the country is surviving with the help of borrowed resources and external support. The polity, for all practical purposes, is being micromanaged by powerful actors behind the scenes. The judiciary is fractured and embroiled in internal struggles between factions aligned with the establishment and those resisting undue interference.

Given the historical trajectory of Pakistan, its institutional framework and current challenges, its major fault lines can be categorised into five overlapping dimensions: (i) Ideological; (ii) Radical Islamic and Sectarian; (iii) Ethnic; (iv) Economic; and (v) Political and Institutional. While these divisions are not entirely distinct, as they often intersect, they collectively shape the country’s turbulent state of affairs.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Zahid Hussain, ‘Rethinking National Security’, *Dawn*, 6 August 2025, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1929048/rethinking-national-security> (Accessed on 7 August 2025).

## THE DISCOURSE ON NATIONAL FAULT LINES

The present study aims to offer an in-depth analysis of the fault lines and contextualise them in light of the recent developments and present state of affairs in Pakistan. The ideological fault line is considered to be the mother of all other fault lines and continues to haunt the nation in many ways. The ideological question remains alive to this day and there appears to be no possibility of settling it once for all. The ideological debate in the country often reflects the inability of the nation in reconciling its Islamic identity with the modern structures of the state. The ‘Two-Nation Theory’ faltered on the same day Pakistan came into existence when a large number of Muslims refused to entertain the idea of a Muslim homeland in the region and tied their destiny with secular democratic state called India. It became further buried when the people of East Pakistan refused to follow the diktats of the Punjabi-Pathan-dominated security establishment that treated ethnic Bengalis as second-class citizens and tried to crush them under the military boot. The politico-security elites never made an honest attempt to address the ideological question in the country. Instead, they reiterated the importance of the Lahore Resolution, the ‘Two-Nation Theory’ and Islamic ideology in the emergence and body politic of Pakistan. At the same time, various constraints and contradictions that demanded serious investigation and explanation were wilfully ignored and pushed under the carpet.

The politico-security elites of the country are confident that they would be able to manage any possible fallout of its ideological fault line in the society. The Grand National Narrative (GNN), crafted by these elites, still revolves around the ‘Two-Nation Theory’, Islamic ideology and India being the existential threat to Pakistan. It is in this context one should read the statement made by Gen. Asim Munir while interacting with overseas Pakistanis on 16 April 2025 in Islamabad. He was categorical in telling overseas Pakistanis that they should pass on the history and story of Pakistan’s emergence to their next generations so that their bonds with the Pakistani nation never weakens.<sup>9</sup> As a nation,

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<sup>9</sup> Asim Munir Speech to Overseas Pakistanis in Islamabad, 16 April 2025, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAOEEc8MdtQ> (Accessed on 18 April 2025).

Pakistan is in constant denial that its ideological foundation has failed to resolve some of the fundamental issues troubling the country. Instead, it has created space for certain indigenous radical Islamic outfits to challenge the very state of Pakistan. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is one of the many such outfits that wants to hijack the nation and establish an Afghan-Taliban style Emirate in the country.

The radical and sectarian fault line is deeply intertwined with the ideological foundations of the country. It is important to note that, in the run up to the creation of Pakistan, the founding fathers of the nation had promised different things to different sections of society. Often, the expectations of one section were entirely different and opposite to the others. These divisions were quite visible in the Constituent Assembly debates in Pakistan that took place between 1947 and 1954. One of the most complicated issues that came up for discussion in the Constituent Assembly was whether to declare Pakistan an Islamic State or not! Most of the Muslim members were in favour of an Islamic state, whereas all the non-Muslim members strongly opposed the idea. Some Muslim members were even of the view that Pakistan does not need a Constitution as the Qur'an and Sunnah offered all the guidance required to govern the country.

The passage of Objectives Resolution in March 1949 opened a Pandora's box as it gave different Islamic sects an opportunity to push for the adoption of their own interpretation of Islam in the country. Ahmadiyas became the first casualty of the prevailing radical and sectarian divisions, as most of the Islamic sects and sub-sects united against them over the issue of *Khatm-e-Nabuwat*.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, Shias – especially Hazaras – faced violence, which later engulfed almost every sect and sub-sect of Islam in the country, including the Deobandi, Ahl-

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<sup>10</sup> The Justice Munir Commission, constituted to probe the 1953 riots in Punjab, came up with startling revelations about a number of issues, including the definition of Muslim, political exploitation of religion and clear signs of rising sectarianism in the country. For details, see Govt. of Lahore, *Report of the Court of Enquiry Constituted under Punjab Act II of 1954 to Enquire into the Punjab Disturbances of 1953*, Government Printing, Lahore, 1953.

e-Hadith, Salafi, Bareilvi and Wahhabi groups. This inter-sect and intra-sect conflict has radicalised the society to such an extent that people have become increasingly sensitive towards their religious and sectarian identity. The radical and sectarian fault line in the country appears to be intensifying. Although its violent manifestations may not be quite visible everywhere, except in some parts of tribal areas, societal relations continue to be strained.

On 11 April 2006, a powerful bomb exploded in Karachi's Nishtar Park, where an estimated 10,000 people belonging to the Bareilvi sect had gathered to celebrate the birth anniversary of Prophet Muhammad.<sup>11</sup> At least 45 people were killed and many more injured in this incident.<sup>12</sup> This attack is considered important in the sectarian history of Pakistan, as it led to the rise of Bareilvi assertions in the society. With the rise of Bareilvi extremist outfits, which aim to challenge the Deobandi influence in the society, the intra-sect differences are accentuating. A recent study, which captures the prevailing radical and sectarian division in the country, found that about 40 per cent of young men and 50 per cent of young women in Pakistan disapprove of having any friendly relations with people from other religions or even other sects.<sup>13</sup> In order to engage its young people in positive endeavours, Pakistan needs to generate at least 1.5 million new jobs annually for the next few decades. However, the politico-security elites have no roadmap whatsoever to harness the country's youth potential. In such a situation, it becomes quite easy for radical and sectarian outfits to target and indoctrinate the young minds for their own ulterior motives.

The ethnic fault line is one of the most prominent fault lines that has already cost Pakistan half of its territory and more than half of its population. Pakistan has historically been a multi-ethnic society, and

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<sup>11</sup> Declan Walsh, 'Karachi Bomb Attack Leaves At Least 45 Sunni Worshipers Dead', *The Guardian*, 12 April 2006, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/apr/12/pakistan.declanwalsh> (Accessed on 24 May 2024).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Adil Najam, 'Pakistan's Moment of Youth', in Maleeha Lodhi (ed.), *Pakistan: The Search for Stability*, Hurst & Company, London, 2024.

even the separation of East Pakistan in 1971 did not change that reality on the ground. Present-day Pakistan has five major ethnic groups – Punjabi, Sindhi, Mohajir, Baloch and Pashtun – and some smaller ethnic groups and sub-groups, such as Saraiki, Brahui, Hindokowan, Kalash, Shina and Burusho. The politico-security elites, from the beginning, did not accept the plural composition of the society and refused to share power with minority ethnic groups, whom they considered inferior and incapable. In due course of time, this attitude fuelled nationalist/separatist tendencies among the Bengali, Mohajir, Sindhi, Pashtun and Baloch populations. Even the relatively less-prominent ethnic groups put forward their demands for the creation of separate provinces so that their issues could be addressed effectively.

In the post-1971 period, Pakistan adopted the twin strategy of occasional accommodation and brutal suppression. The strategy has so far worked well to douse the nationalistic aspirations of the Mohajir and Sindhi groups. By accommodating Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and allowing it to rule at the federal level, the politico-security elites successfully weakened G.M. Syed's call for a separate Sindhudesh. In case of Mohajir, a combination of accommodation and a lethal military crackdown broke their resolve for an independent state. The case of the Baloch and Pashtun appear to be a bit different than that of the Sindhi and Mohajir ethnicities. The Pashtun and Baloch groups were among the first to raise their voice against Pakistan. It is important to note that Pashtuns did not buy Jinnah's communal 'Two-Nation Theory' and opposed India's partition on religious lines. They went on to support the anti-colonial movement of the Congress party. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the most prominent Pashtun leader, had ruled out joining Pakistan when partition became inevitable. He even explored the possibility of an independent Pashtunistan and boycotted the referendum that was to decide the fate of the erstwhile North Western Frontier Province (NWFP).

The present-day Pashtun nationalists take inspiration from Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan and his non-violent means. They peacefully demand basic human rights, justice and end of violence in the region. Instead of resolving the genuine issues concerns raised by Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) in the form of six-point demands, the security elites proceeded to accuse them of playing into the hands of Pakistan's

enemies. When pressure tactics, persuasion, intimidation and suppression did not work, they resorted to punitive actions. When nothing worked, the politico-security elites placed a ban on the activities of the PTM through an Interior Ministry notification. Under such challenging circumstances, the Pashtun diaspora has emerged as a powerful moral and political force that amplifies the genuine grievances of the community on broader global platforms. From Washington to Berlin, its voice grows louder, challenging Pakistan's internal policies through transnational protest.

For their part, the Baloch people, right since the beginning, opposed Pakistan's attempt to forcefully annex Kalat. Their struggle to achieve an independent Balochistan is now extending into the fifth phase. At present, the movement is led by the young and educated middle class who are unwilling to compromise with the Pakistani state apparatus and strongly oppose the unholy nexus between China and Pakistan to deprive them of their land and natural resources. Despite all its efforts, including brutal suppression, Pakistan has not been able to break their resolve for an independent Balochistan. In the process, certain Baloch outfits such as the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and Baloch Liberation Front (BLF) have emerged as the vanguard of the renewed struggle, and Pakistan's armed forces find it quite difficult to deal with them. Of late, these groups have resorted to suicide bombing as a tactic to pressurise the Pakistani State and its armed forces. BLA's suicide squad also includes women who are ready to offer the supreme sacrifice for the Baloch cause. In April 2022, Shari Baloch, a mother of two young children, blew herself up at the Confucius Institute in Karachi University, killing Chinese educators. Another women suicide bomber, Mahal Baloch, was part of Operation Herof, launched by BLA in August 2024, which resulted in the death of over 130 armed forces personnel.<sup>14</sup> This indicates the extent of frustration in ordinary Baloch people in the country.

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<sup>14</sup> BLA (2024), 'Operation Herof was the First Phase of Reclaiming Control over Baloch Land-BLA', Press Release, Baloch Liberation Army, 26 August 2024, available at: [https://x.com/bahot\\_baluch/status/1828132954800861241](https://x.com/bahot_baluch/status/1828132954800861241) (Accessed on 28 August 2024).

In the recent past, BLA displayed its ability to successfully conduct sophisticated operations against the Pakistani State and its armed forces. On 11 March 2025, they hijacked the Peshawar-bound Jaffar Express and held a large number of armed forces personnel, who were travelling by the train, as hostage. Later, through a series of press releases, BLA claimed to have killed 214 personnel as Pakistan did not accept their demands. The Pakistan Army refuted the claim and stated that, during the rescue operation, it lost 26 people, including 18 armed forces personnel. In the absence of a credible and neutral reporting on the issue, it is difficult to verify claims made by both the BLA and Pakistan Army. However, the hijacking of an entire train under the nose of the Pakistan Army indicates the growing strength of Baloch nationalists in the region.

Given the present state of affairs in the country, the ethnic fault lines in Balochistan and KP seem to be intensifying. In Balochistan, due to highhandedness of the Pakistan's state apparatus, especially the security establishment, the crack has widened beyond repair. The Sino-Pak joint collaboration in the form of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and other exploitative projects in the region have paved the way for further marginalisation of the Baloch in their own territory. With each passing day, they are losing hopes of a peaceful life in a unified Pakistan. In KP, the situation is relatively stable as the Pashtun community as a whole has not engaged in armed resistance against the country's security establishment. People in general do not associate with TTP's agenda and oppose its activities in one way or the other. Their struggle is primarily peaceful and there appears to be no sign of it getting violent anytime in the near future. However, Pakistan should not take any solace from it. The politico-security elites must realise that, without addressing the genuine grievances, they will not be able to win the hearts and minds of the Pashtun people living in the sensitive areas bordering Taliban-dominated Afghanistan.

## THE IDEOLOGICAL FAULT LINE

The ideological fault line in Pakistan may not appear to be the most significant at present due to other pressing issues, problems and challenges faced by the nation. However, it can definitely be considered the mother of all other fault lines that not only exist but continue to haunt the country. Unlike many post-colonial states, Pakistan struggled from its inception to develop a unified national narrative accepted by all without any significant reservations. Although Muhammad Ali Jinnah himself did not talk much about Pakistan being an ideological state, he did give some impressions that could be interpreted either way. On 12 June 1945, while speaking to the Muslim Student Federation Conference in Peshawar, he categorically stated, 'Pakistan not only means freedom and independence but Islamic ideology which has to be preserved, which has come to us as a precious gift and a treasure, which, we hope, others will share with us'.<sup>15</sup> His successors took it upon themselves to delineate it soon after the partition. The cornerstones of this new national ideology were to be rooted in Islam, hostility to India and the Urdu language.<sup>16</sup>

The forefathers of the newly created Pakistan thought these as important unifying factors and binding cement for every section of the society. The noted Pakistani historian, Ayesha Jalal, suggests that the ideological debate has historically been symptomatic of the difficulties Pakistan faces in reconciling its self-professed Islamic identity with the imperatives of a modern state structure.<sup>17</sup> She also argues while Pakistan's creation

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<sup>15</sup> Syed Sharifuddin Prizada, 'Quaid-I-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah', *Pakistan Journal of History & Culture*, XXIX (1), pp. 13–18.

<sup>16</sup> Husain Haqqani, *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military*, Carnegie Endowment of International Peace, Washington D.C., 2005, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan's Political Economy of Defence*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, p. 1.

may have given some credence to the claim of Muslims being entitled to determine their political future as a nation, the 'Two-Nation Theory' miserably failed to explain why the Muslims of the subcontinent ended up becoming citizens of two mutually hostile states.<sup>18</sup> There is little doubt about Pakistan's failure to live up to even the modest expectations of its Muslim citizenry, the majority of whom painfully separated from their so-called homeland to create a new nation-state, Bangladesh.

A careful examination of pre-partition history, particularly in the backdrop of India's national movement, suggests that the movement for a separate state of Pakistan gathered momentum with implicit as well as explicit support from the British colonial government. G.M. Syed suggests that, in the wake of freedom movement gathering momentum in India, upper-class Muslims collaborated with the British and sought their help for establishing a separate state in Muslim-majority areas of undivided India.<sup>19</sup> It is no secret that British employed the 'Divide and Rule' tactic to consolidate and prolong their rule in India. They targeted and jailed prominent leaders of the Indian National Congress and deliberately left the leaders of All India Muslim League untouched. Lord Linlithgow, Viceroy and Governor General of India from 1936 to 1944, is believed to have fostered the discord between the Hindus and Muslims and facilitated the process of accentuation of Muslim demands, which crystallised in the form of a separate state. In order to fully understand the importance of the ideological fault line and its fallout, one needs to delve deep into the process that led to its emergence in the first place.

## PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS

The years 1936–39 are considered a period of political transformation for the Indian National Congress as it decided to temporarily suspend the confrontational path and give constitutional politics a chance to

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> G.M. Syed, *A Nation in Chains: Sindbudesh*, G.M. Sayed Institute of Social Sciences, Sindh, 1974, p. 4.

advance towards the goal of *purn swaraj* [total independence]. Mahatma Gandhi had given a free hand to all sections of the society to adopt their own means and mechanisms as long as they focused on opposing the British rule. After a thorough debate and discussion within the organisation, the Congress agreed to take part in the elections. From 1934, the Congress started participating in assembly and local body elections as and when they were held. These elections were crucial for the Congress to test its popular base on the one hand and gain organisational experience on the other. Moreover, the Congress also learned about planning and managing the electoral process.

During 1936–37, provincial elections were held, as per the 1935 Government of India Act, in eleven provinces – namely Madras, Central Provinces, Bihar, Orissa, United Provinces, Bombay Presidency, Assam, North West Frontier Province (NWFP), Bengal, Punjab and Sindh. Out of a total 1,585 seats in provincial lower houses, the Congress emerged victorious in 711 seats,<sup>20</sup> whereas the Muslim League won only 103 seats.<sup>21</sup> The Congress secured majority on its own in Bihar, Bombay, Central Provinces, Madras, Orissa and United Province.<sup>22</sup> In Assam, Bengal and NWFP, it emerged as the single largest party. In Punjab and Sindh, its performance was poor due to the domination of regional parties. It is also important to note that the Congress did not fare well in the Muslim-majority areas, except in NWFP. This was acknowledged by none other than Jawaharlal Nehru himself, who admitted that the Congress had failed in its efforts to secure Muslim seats and remarked that, ‘Only in regard to the Muslim seats did we lack success . . . We failed because we had neglected working among Muslim masses and we could not reach them in time’.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> S.M. Burke and Salim Al-Din Quraishi, *Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah: His Personality and his Politics*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1997, p. 217.

<sup>21</sup> K.K. Aziz (ed.), *Muslims Under Congress Rule, 1937-1939: A Documentary Record, Vol. 1*, Renaissance Publishing House, New Delhi, 1986, p. 58.

<sup>22</sup> Uma Kaura, *Muslims and Indian Nationalism: The Emergence of the Demand for India's Partition, 1928-40*, Manohar Book Service, New Delhi, 1997, p. 108.

<sup>23</sup> *Times of India*, 3 March 1937.

If the Congress acknowledged that its tally in Muslim-majority areas was not impressive, the Muslim League's performance was pathetic, as it could not secure victory even in the four Muslim-majority provinces. However, it did well in minority seats in Hindu-majority states and secured 103 out of 485 seats reserved for Muslims. The League's most effective performance was in Bengal, where it won 40 out of a total 250 seats.<sup>24</sup> In United Province, it secured 26 seats out of 228 seats, whereas in Bombay, it won 18 seats out of 175 seats.<sup>25</sup> In Punjab, it could get only two seats and failed to open its accounts in both NWFP and Sind.<sup>26</sup> These results were quite opposite to Jinnah's expectations. The League leaders had hoped that they would dominate the Muslim-majority provinces and stake the claim of representing India's Muslims. Some historians and analysts have suggested that there was a tacit understanding between the League and the Congress in United Province, according to which the two parties were to form a coalition government irrespective of the electoral outcome.<sup>27</sup> In fact, Chaudhry Khaliqzaman of the Muslim League had worked in unison with Congress in finalising candidates for the elections in United Province.<sup>28</sup> In return, he expected the League to be invited to be part of the government and given a fair share in the cabinet.

Abul Kalam Azad too was hopeful that the two prominent League leaders, Chaudhry Khaliqzaman and Nawab Ismail Khan, could be inducted into the cabinet and the League would cooperate with the Congress and accept its programme. However, Jawaharlal Nehru undermined Azad's efforts and wrote to Khaliqzaman and Ismail Khan that only one of them could be part of the cabinet.<sup>29</sup> Later, the Congress put forward the condition that the Muslim League should

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<sup>24</sup> K.K. Aziz, note no. 21, p. 58.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ishtiaq Ahmed, *The Punjab Bloodied, Partitioned and Cleansed: Unravelling the 1947 Tragedy through Secret British Reports and First Person Accounts*, Rupa Publications, New Delhi, 2011, p. 390.

<sup>28</sup> S.M. Burke and Salim Al-Din Quraishi, note no. 20, p. 224.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

cease to function as a separate group and its elected legislative members of the province become part and parcel of Congress.<sup>30</sup> This was unacceptable to the League, thus, a possible coalition did not materialise. Many Congress leaders, including Abul Kalam Azad, considered this step as a mistake, and believed that an opportunity was missed to initiate a slow merger of the Muslim League into the Congress. Moreover, the possibility of the Congress and the League coming under a coalition and working together was also lost. From here onwards, the League adopted a communal agenda and focused on grassroots mobilisation and began getting some traction within the Muslim community.

## THE BRITISH PLOY

The British were following post-election developments closely and realised that if the Muslim League could be pampered a bit, they would be able to effectively counter the Congress' claim of representing the whole of India. Lord Linlithgow, the then Viceroy of India, wrote to the Governor that '... they will, I would judge, have to endeavour to build a communal organization comparable to that of the Congress if they are to be sure that their roots are well founded'.<sup>31</sup> The British considered the growing rift between the Muslim League and Congress, or for that matter between Muslims and Hindus, a necessary evil to keep the provincial ministries of Congress in check. By 1939, the Muslim League was successful in increasing its presence in urban pockets but it was still far from being a formidable force against the Congress. In one of his public addresses in April 1939, Jinnah stated, 'I make no secret of the fact that Muslims and Hindus are two nations and Muslims cannot maintain their status as such unless they acquire national self-consciousness and national self-determination'.<sup>32</sup> This was the precursor

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<sup>30</sup> K.K. Aziz, note no. 21, p. 115.

<sup>31</sup> Sunil Chander, 'Congress-Raj Conflict and the Rise of the Muslim League in the Ministry Period, 1937-39', *Modern Asian Studies*, 21(92), 303-328, 1987.

<sup>32</sup> Government of Pakistan, *Quaid-I-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah: The Leader of a Nation*, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Islamabad, 2021, p. 42.

of what later came to be known as the demand of a homeland for the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent.

In a fast-changing geopolitical development, the British Government, through Lord Linlithgow, made India part of the Allied powers in the World War II without making any attempt to obtain consent from the people of India in general and provincial governments in particular. The Congress was perturbed by this development and demanded that the British declare their war aims and sought assurances that India would be treated as an independent nation. Instead of addressing these concerns, the British decided to use the growing discord between the Congress and Muslim League in its favour. On 26 September 1939, Lord Linlithgow told Mahatma Gandhi that there was no prospect of declaring the war aims or yielding power at the centre when the Britain was engaged in life and death struggle.<sup>33</sup> He also categorically told Gandhi that the Congress was not the only party, as the Princes and Muslims too have legitimate claims.<sup>34</sup>

By now, Lord Linlithgow had offered to treat the Muslim League at par with Congress if the former wholeheartedly support the British war efforts, an outcome Jinnah desired. On his part, Jinnah had pledged the loyalty of Muslim community in his deliberations. He had even suggested to Linlithgow that, 'Muslim areas should be separated from Hindu areas and run by Muslims in collaboration with Great Britain'.<sup>35</sup> From then onwards, the British tilt towards Jinnah and Muslim League became an open secret. Jinnah took full advantage of this new bonhomie and started exploring the possibility of a separate state to satisfy his ego to attain parity with the Congress. When Congress ministries in the provinces resigned, Jinnah rejoiced and appealed to the Muslims to observe 22 December 1939 as the 'Day of Deliverance'.

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<sup>33</sup> Narendra Singh Sarila, *The Shadow of the Great Game: The Untold Story of India's Partition*, HarperCollins, New Delhi, 2005, p. 41.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Many scholars consider the resignation of Congress ministries a mistake that gave an open field for Jinnah and the Muslim League to advance their agenda.

## **THE DEMAND FOR PAKISTAN**

Soon after the resignation of Congress ministries, Jinnah declared that Muslims were not a minority in British India, but a nation in itself. In February 1940, the Congress made it clear that it would soon launch a civil disobedience movement. The Congress was now on a path of direct confrontation with the British, albeit through non-violent means. From now onwards, the British tilt towards Muslim League became obvious. This was a well-thought-out strategy of the British to exploit the divided public opinion in the country over the issue. The Muslim League, under Jinnah, was ready to cooperate with the British to undermine Congress's outreach and influence in the society. With the British solidly backing and favouring the Muslim League over Congress, Jinnah embarked upon the idea of separate state/s for the Muslims in the region. In his presidential address to the Muslim League session at Lahore, Jinnah categorically stated:

It is extremely difficult to appreciate why our Hindu friends fail to understand the real nature of Islam and Hinduism. They are not religions in the strict sense of the world, but are, in fact, different and distinct social orders; and it is a dream that the Hindus and Muslims can ever evolve a common nationality; and this misconception of one Indian nation has gone far beyond the limits and is the cause of more of our troubles and will lead India to destruction if we fail to revise our notions in time. Hindus and Muslims belong to two different religious philosophies, social customs, and literature[s]. They neither intermarry nor interdine together, and indeed they belong to two different civilisations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions. Their aspects [perspectives] on life, and of life, are different. It is quite clear that Hindus and Mussalmans derive their inspiration from different sources of history. They have different epics, their heroes are different, and different episodes. Very often the hero of one is a foe of the other, and likewise their victories and defeats overlap. To yoke together two such nations under a single

state, one as a numerical minority and the other as a majority, must lead to growing disconnect, and final destruction of any fabric that may be so built up for the government of such a state.<sup>36</sup>

The Lahore Resolution *inter alia* stated ‘... that the areas in which the Muslims are numerically in a majority as in the North-Western and Eastern Zones of India, should be grouped to constitute “Independent States” in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign’.<sup>37</sup> Many activists, supporters and sympathisers of the Muslim League interpreted the resolution to mean as if more than one state in Muslim-majority areas was to be carved out. G.M. Syed, who became the strongest voice of Sindh nationalism later, held the same view as well. Besides, a large number of Muslims in India were opposed to the possibility of any territorial division on religious lines. Maulana Husain Ahmad Madni was of the view that any attempt to create a division among the Indians on the basis of religion was nothing but a colonial ploy. To support his argument, he invoked the celebrated ‘Prophetic’ example of the Constitution of Medina, which advised Muslims and non-Muslim to share a common polity.<sup>38</sup>

To counter the Muslim League’s separatist move, the Azad Muslim Conference organised a massive gathering of Muslim organisations that were opposed to the demand of a separate state based on the fraudulent ‘Two-Nation Theory’. The gathering was attended by representatives from Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind, Majlis-i-Ahrar, the All India Momin Conference, the All India Shia Political Conference, Khudai Khidmatgars, the Bengal Krishak Praja Party, Anjuman-i-Watan

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 42.

<sup>36</sup> Mohammad Ali Jinnah Presidential Speech, All India Muslim League Session, Lahore, 24 March 1940.

<sup>37</sup> The Lahore Resolution, 24 March 1940.

<sup>38</sup> Barbara D. Metcalf (2017), ‘Maulana Husain Ahmad Madni and the Jami’at Ulama-i-Hind: Against Pakistan, against the Muslim League, in Ali Usman Qasmi and Megan Eaton Robb (eds), *Muslims against the Muslim League: Critiques of the Idea of Pakistan*, Cambridge University Press New York.

(Balochistan), the All India Muslim Majlis and Jamiat Ahl-i-Hadith.<sup>39</sup> However, such counter-moves did not yield the desired outcome, as they could not lead to the emergence of a strong organised group of Muslims to directly take on the Muslim League's separatist tendency.<sup>40</sup>

The Muslim League gained prominence in the ensuing years and projected itself as the protector of Muslim interests in the region. Another factor that helped the Muslim League increase its popular base in the country was the British crackdown against the Congress and the imprisonment of its leaders following individual disobedience and the Quit India Movement. There was virtually no important Congress leader left in the field to counter the Muslim League's propaganda and expose its nexus with the colonial powers. By the time they were released in 1944–45, the tide had largely been turned within the Muslim community. In August 1945, Lord Wavell, the then Viceroy, announced the elections for the central and provincial legislatures. By now, the Muslim League was in a much more comfortable position as far as the Muslim constituencies were concerned.

It is important to note that Jinnah and the Muslim League were able to convince a substantial section of Muslims, especially elites who had voting rights in the elections, about their demand for a separate Pakistan. In order to achieve this objective, the Muslim League promised different things to different sections of Muslims in British India. For example, in a letter to the Pir of Manki Sharif, a promise was made that laws in Pakistan would not be inconsistent with the Shariat. While addressing a meeting of Pathans, Jinnah categorically stated, 'Do you want Pakistan or not? ... Well, if you want Pakistan, vote for the League candidates. If we fail to realize our duty today you will be reduced to the status of

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<sup>39</sup> Ali Usman Qasmi and Megan Eaton Robb (2017), 'Introduction', in *Muslims against the Muslim League: Critiques of the Idea of Pakistan*, Cambridge University Press, New York.

<sup>40</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Modern Islam in India: A Social Analysis*, Sh. Mohamad Ashraf, Lahore, 1946, p. 306.

Sudras (low caste Hindus) and Islam will be vanquished from India. I shall never allow a Muslim to be slaves of Hindus'.<sup>41</sup>

It is interesting to note that there was a clear division among the Deobandis over the issue of the Muslim League's separatist tendency. However, the Barelvīs were wedded to the cause of Pakistan right from the beginning.<sup>42</sup> In Punjab, where the Muslims elite was not an ardent supporter of Jinnah, the League sought help from conservative religious elements, including ulema (Islamic scholars) and *sajjada nashin* (hereditary heads of Sufi shrines). They argued that people voting for the Muslim League would be entitled a seat in heaven, whereas those voting against could be termed *kafir* [non-believers] and condemned to hell.

The elections for central and provincial assemblies were scheduled to be held in 1945–46. In the end, the League framed the elections with an overt religious tone and reduced it to the single most important question surrounding the survival of Islam. In one of his speeches, Maulana Abdus Sattar Khan Niazi stated, 'We have got two alternatives before us, whether to join or rather accept the slavery of *Bania Brahman Raj* in Hindustan or join the Muslim fraternity, the federation of Muslim provinces'.<sup>43</sup> He went on to incite people by saying, 'Every Pathan takes it as an insult for him to prostrate before Hindu Raj and will gladly sit with his brethren in Islam in the Pakistan Constituent Assembly'.<sup>44</sup> The entire electoral campaign of Muslim League was centred around one issue – Pakistan. On numerous occasions, Jinnah emphasized:

We are not fighting elections to form Ministries, we are fighting to get a verdict on the Pakistan issue... support the official League

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<sup>41</sup> Khalid bin Sayeed, *Pakistan: The Formative Phase*, Oxford University Press, London, 1968, pp. 198–199.

<sup>42</sup> Ashok K. Behuria, 'Sect Within Sect: The Case of Deobandi-Bareilvi Encounter in Pakistan', *Strategic Analysis*, 32 (1), pp. 57–80, 2008.

<sup>43</sup> Khalid bin Sayeed, note no. 41, p. 203.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

candidate even though he may be a lamp post; support and vote for him does not mean approval of some or disapproval of others ... we want to secure a thumping verdict at this moment and prove to the world that Musalmans have definitely decided to achieve Pakistan.<sup>45</sup>

## AMBIGUITIES AND UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

The ambiguities surrounding the nature of the proposed homeland remain unanswered even after several decades. Many analysts are of the view that Pakistan at best was imagined insufficiently by its forefathers, due to which not everything was known to the people. Jinnah, on his part, projected himself as, according to Ayesha Jalal, ‘the sole spokesman’<sup>46</sup> and very much wanted to see Pakistan become a reality. However, at the same time, he himself was not quite sure if that would happen anytime soon. This itself explains why there was no clear-cut roadmap for the creation of Muslim homeland in the region. It seems the forefathers of Pakistan had no intent to carefully work upon the nature and structure of the State and its important institutions. Most of their time was consumed in relentless communal campaigning to win over the support of the Muslim populace. Unlike Congress, the League did not utter a single word against the British colonial rule during the election campaigns.

The results of 1945–46 elections were eye-opening. Except in NWFP, the Muslim League performed well in all regions. However, it could not form a government in Muslim-majority provinces on its own. The elections for Central Legislature was held in December 1945, in which League managed to win all 30 seats reserved for the Muslims. In provincial elections that took place in early 1946, it won 423 seats out

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<sup>45</sup> Waheed Ahmad, ‘The General Elections of 1945-46: Quaid-I-Azam’s Springboard to Pakistan’, *Pakistan Journal of History & Culture*, XXII (2), 2008, pp. 127–139.

<sup>46</sup> Ayesha Jalal, (2014), *The Struggle for Pakistan: A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics*, London: Harvard University Press, p. 32.

of a total 491 Muslim seats. The League lost 21 seats in NWFP, one in Central Province, three in Assam, seven in Sindh, six in Bihar and 11 in United Province. In contrast, the Congress contested in 94 Muslim constituencies in the country, out of which it was able to win 23 seats; three in UP, one in Bihar and 19 in NWFP.<sup>47</sup> The 1945–46 election results greatly emboldened the League to put forward a convincing claim of representing Indian Muslims. Riding on the success of the Muslim League’s electoral performance, Jinnah claimed that the mandate was given to him by the Muslims to negotiate their future on their behalf – a claim that the British readily accepted and that Congress found difficult to counter.

Most of the people – including those in the Muslim League – did not know much about Pakistan that was to emerge in coming months. Many – including Jinnah, who won the case for Pakistan on the basis of the erroneous ‘Two-Nation Theory’ – were not even practicing Muslims. However, they used Islam as an instrument of what Christophe Jafferlot calls ‘ethno-nationalist mobilisation’.<sup>48</sup> Right from the beginning till the end, Jinnah never precisely defined the demand for a Muslim homeland, resulting in a host of conflicting shapes and vague forms that many League leaders twisted to fit their own imaginations.<sup>49</sup> Several leaders as well as supporters of the League argued that a vote for the League was a vote for the Prophet and that the Battle of Karbala was going to be fought again in this land.<sup>50</sup> It is quite interesting to know that Khawaja Nazimuddin, who later become the Governor-General of Pakistan after Jinnah, and also served as prime minister after the

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<sup>47</sup> Waheed Ahmad, ‘The General Elections of 1945-46: Quaid-I-Azam’s Springboard to Pakistan’, *Pakistan Journal of History & Culture*, XXII (2), 2008, pp. 127–139.

<sup>48</sup> Christophe Jafferlot, (2015), *The Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resilience*, Gurgaon: Random House, p.87.

<sup>49</sup> Ayesha Jalal, note no. 46, p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Christophe Jafferlot, note no. 48.

assassination of Liaquat Ali Khan, told a British governor just before partition that he did not know ‘what Pakistan means and that nobody in the Muslim League knew’.<sup>51</sup> Ayesha Jalal later pointed out the claim that Muslims had largely voted in favour of Pakistan may not entirely be based on facts. She argued that Muslims ‘had not ratified a specific programme because no programme had actually been specified. No one was clear about the real meaning of “Pakistan” let alone its precise geographical boundaries’.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, in August 1947, with British support, the League, under Muhammad Ali Jinnah, was able to incorporate two Muslim-majority regions into one single dominion called Pakistan. The rest of the British Indian territory came to be recognised as India. Pakistan came into being with an explicit agenda of providing a homeland to the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent and ensuring their physical, economic, religious and cultural security. The early leaders propagated the idea that the new country would create such an environment in which the Muslims would be able to pursue their civilisational destiny without being dominated by the Hindu majority of India.

The proponents of Pakistan were also of the view that the newly created country would not be able to carve out its niche in the comity of nations unless it secures a clear break from India. Therefore, they expended great efforts to ensure that the new country would be completely different from India. This desired separateness resulted in the construction of a state with Islamic identity, which emphasised on the ‘Two-Nation Theory’ as the *raison d’être* of its existence. Thus, right from the beginning, Pakistan acquired an identity that was precisely un-Indian or non-Indian – even anti-Indian.

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<sup>51</sup> Husain Haqqani, *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington D.C., 2005, p. 6.

<sup>52</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan’s Political Economy of Defence*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, p. 20.

## COLLAPSE OF THE IDEOLOGICAL PLANK

Jinnah might have harboured personal political ambitions that guided him to do what he did to get a desired outcome. However, from the start, he too knew that the ideological plank upon which he garnered support for Pakistan had certain inherent flaws. Some analysts are of the view that Jinnah was quite aware of the dangers of using religion as a tool<sup>53</sup> and exploiting the emotions and sentiments of the Muslims to achieve ill-conceived political objectives. Winning the case of Pakistan was definitely an important objective, but making it viable for its inhabitants was going to be a monumental task. A large number of people were crossing over artificially constructed borders to be on the right side of the fence at the right time. Some estimates suggest that at least 20 million people were displaced during the Partition of British India. This was one of the biggest cases of known but unplanned migration in the world, in which millions of people made their way to their preferred choice of nation. Several million suffered extreme communal violence amid the ensuing frenzy. Pakistan, being a nascent state, found it almost impossible to effectively cope with the emerging situation. And this is precisely the reason why, just before the partition came into effect, Jinnah delivered the historic speech of 11 August 1947 in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan. In that speech he argued *inter alia* that:

No power can hold another nation, and specially a nation of 400 million souls in subjection; nobody could have conquered you, and even if it had happened, nobody could have continued its hold on you for any length of time but for this. Therefore we must learn a lesson from this. You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to

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<sup>53</sup> Moohis Ahmar, (2022), “Beyond Paying Lip Service”, *Dawn*, 23 March 2022, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1681451/beyond-paying-lip-service> (Accessed on 24 May 2023).

any religion or caste or creed that has nothing to do with the business of the State.<sup>54</sup>

G.M. Syed termed this declaration of Jinnah ‘as a complete and most decisive rebuttal of the theory of nation on basis of religion, over which Pakistan was founded’.<sup>55</sup> There were attempts from within the Pakistani establishment to heavily censor the speech before its release. The Pakistan government’s Public Relations Office tried to convince Altaf Hussain, the then editor of *Dawn* English daily, to purge certain parts of the speech.<sup>56</sup> However, he did not budge as Jinnah himself had no such intentions. The audio recording (in its entirety) went missing immediately and remains untraceable to this day. Some insiders believed that the speech contradicted the very ideology of Pakistan, which might have contributed to the disappearance of the complete recording.<sup>57</sup> Those at the helm in Karachi soon realised that the country would not be able to handle and absorb a large number of Muslims leaving India for Pakistan. In September 1947, Jinnah argued that Muslims in Delhi had now two options: ask for a fair deal from the Indian government or start a civil war.<sup>58</sup> It is interesting to note that the Muslim League, which fought for a Muslim homeland, was not ready to take Muslims as citizens of the new country. There was a suggestion in the meeting of Pakistan’s Emergency Committee to consider sending Liaquat Ali Khan to Delhi to convince and advise Muslims to stay on and look to the Indian government for protection.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Muhammad Ali Jinnah’s Speech in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan, 11 August 1947.

<sup>55</sup> G.M. Syed, note no. 19, p. 5.

<sup>56</sup> Nadeem F. Paracha, ‘Smokers’ Corner: The Lost Recordings of Jinnah’, *Dawn*, 13 May 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Farrukh Khan Pitafi, ‘Pakistan’s Actual Fault Lines’, *The Express Tribune*, 31 July 2020.

<sup>58</sup> Vazila Fazila Yacoobali Zamindar, *The Long Partition and Making of Modern South Asia: Refugees, Boundaries, Histories*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2007, p. 41.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

There were intense debates over the contents of the 11 August speech between those who believed that Jinnah envisioned Pakistan as a modern Muslim-majority state and those who thought that he envisioned an Islamic republic that was to evolve into a theocracy at some point in the future.<sup>60</sup> After almost eight decades, the debate is still not settled in Pakistan and forms the most important ideological fault line in the country. The liberal and pragmatic section of the society does not subscribe to the conservative interpretation and believes that Jinnah imagined Pakistan as a modern state where all its citizens could enjoy equal rights and protection. However, the religious right in general and Islamic extremists in particular think that Pakistan, from its inception, was meant to be an ideological state. The ultra-Islamists go a step further to claim that people's life in Pakistan must be regulated by the laws of Allah Almighty.

Christophe Jaffrelot is of the view that, instead of resolving the issues faced by the Muslims of South Asia, the emergence of Pakistan created more complex problems for them.<sup>61</sup> Farzana Sheikh, in her book *Making Sense of Pakistan*, argues that the country remains an enigma and means different things to different people even after several decades of its creation. These multiple meanings, in her view, have invariably frustrated the cohesion of a national community.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the 'Two-Nation Theory' lost its legitimacy the day Pakistan was created, as a large number of Muslims preferred to continue living in India rather than migrate to Pakistan to pursue, what many claimed, their civilisational destiny. The theory further lost its appeal after the 1971 debacle, when the numerically superior East Pakistan separated from West Pakistan to emerge as Bangladesh. However, Pakistan did not make any serious effort to renegotiate a new social contract and develop an all-inclusive ideology for itself. It continues to stick to the old narrative based on the defunct 'Two-Nation Theory'.

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<sup>60</sup> Nadeem F. Paracha, note no. 56.

<sup>61</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot, note no. 48, pp.2-3.

<sup>62</sup> Farzana Shaikh, *Making Sense of Pakistan*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2009, p. 1.

The ‘Two-Nation Theory’ emphasises an eponymous Muslim identity constructed on the basis of its irreconcilable differences with the ‘Hindu identity’, which should have been buried the day Pakistan was created. This ‘Muslimness’ of the identity, to begin with, clashed with Jinnah’s vision contained in his address on 11 August 1947 that sought to define Pakistan as a liberal and secular state. Later, it gave rise to yet another dilemma – whether Pakistan should be a state for the Muslims or an Islamic state. With a vocal constituency demanding ‘Islamisation’ of the statecraft in Pakistan, despite occasional use of the Islamic crutch by the military establishment to crush dissent, the ruling class soon found that, even while emphasising on Islam, there was no consensus on what kind of Islamic state Pakistan were to become. Each sect and denomination wanted to build Pakistan as an Islamic state with the adoption of its own version of Islam, which starkly contrasted with that advocated by others. The success of the Pakistan movement in carving out a separate state for Muslims of the subcontinent could hardly resolve these ideological differences around ‘Islam’, leading to radicalisation of different sects and inter-sectarian strife that pose a critical internal security threat to Pakistan.

The ideological fault line in Pakistan remains alive to this day. The politico-security elites appear to be confident enough to manage the possible fallout in the society. They have weaved their Grand National Narrative around the ‘Two-Nation Theory’, Islamic ideology and India as an existential threat. It is no surprise that the Pakistan Army claims to defend both the territorial and ideological frontiers of the country. On 16 April 2025, Pakistan’s Army Chief Gen. Asim Munir, while interacting with overseas Pakistanis, categorically stated:

Our forefathers thought that we are different from Hindus in every possible aspect of life ... Our forefathers, they have sacrificed immensely and we have sacrificed a lot for the creation of this country ... Please don’t forget the story of Pakistan and don’t forget to narrate the story of Pakistan to your next generation so that their bonds with Pakistan never weakens.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> ‘Army Chief Asim Munir’s Full Speech From Convention for Overseas Pakistanis’, *Dawn News*, YouTube, 16 April 2025, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yN0DWMljGBU> (Accessed on 18 April 2025).

Certain radical Islamic groups that are not satisfied with the hybrid system in place occasionally raise the issue of implementation of an Islamic system in the country. One such outfit is Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which has pronounced the entire state apparatus in Pakistan to be un-Islamic. They and many other such outfits have no faith in the system and are looking for an opportunity to overthrow it. The TTP, on its part, intends to establish an Afghan-Taliban-style Emirate in Pakistan. Possibly, to counter the ideological question, of late, Pakistan has started referring to TTP as *Fitna-al-Khawrij* (beyond the pale of Islam) in all its official pronouncements. This may sound interesting but does in no way help resolve the ideological fault line at home and reduce the threat posed by TTP and other Islamist outfits to the very state apparatus of Pakistan.

## THE RADICAL AND SECTARIAN FAULT LINE

Pakistan's radical and sectarian divisions are deeply intertwined with its ideological foundation. Many argue that embracing a religion-based ideology without considering its long-term repercussions steered the nation towards the dangerous terrain of radical extremism and sectarianism. Those who rallied under the banner of Islam and were driven by faith-centred political slogans remained unmoved by Jinnah's call to separate religion from governance. His pivotal speech on 11 August 1947 fell on deaf ears. Following his death, Liaqat Ali Khan struggled to withstand pressure from the religious right. There were intense debates and heated discussions in the Constituent Assembly between Muslim and non-Muslim members over several issues, including the nature of the State. The First Constituent Assembly, which functioned from 1947–54, saw intense debate and discussions between the members of two major political parties – the Pakistan Muslim League, which represented the government's point of view, and the Pakistan National Congress, which was composed of Hindu members from erstwhile East Pakistan.

### THE OBJECTIVES RESOLUTION

One of the most complicated and sensitive issues before the Constituent Assembly was whether to officially declare Pakistan as an Islamic state or not. A number of *ulema* and religious figures, including the Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam (JUI) President Maulana Shabbir Ahmad Usmani, the Pir of Manki Sharif Syed Amin-ul-Hasnat, and the President of East Pakistan Muslim League Maulana Akram Khan, argued in favour of making Pakistan an Islamic state. Maulana Shabbir Ahmad Usmani repeatedly stated that Pakistan was founded to function as an Islamic state. He also pointed out that Muslims were in danger and they could

survive and prosper only with the help of God.<sup>64</sup> Jamaat-e-Islami, which was not part of the government, also constantly urged the government to declare Pakistan an Islamic state and ensure that the Constitution is based on the Islamic principles. Maulana Maududi had put forward a four-point demand, which *inter alia* called for the recognition of the supreme sovereignty of God with the State acting as His agent; the adoption of *Sharia* as the basic law of the land; and prohibition of state authorities from transgressing the limits laid down in Islam.<sup>65</sup> Most of the Muslim members of the Constituent Assembly were in favour of declaring Pakistan as an Islamic state because they considered religion to be the most important factor behind the demand and creation of Pakistan as an independent nation.

Some members even argued that Pakistan does not need any constitution as the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah* provided everything required to govern the citizens of the country. On 7 March 1949, the Objectives Resolution was introduced, which resulted in a deadlock as all non-Muslim members opposed it tooth and nail. They believed that the proposed resolution reflected the views of neither Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah nor the Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan. Instead, it was meant to fulfil the ambitions of the *ulema*.<sup>66</sup> One minority member, Prem Hari, suggested that the motion should first be circulated to evoke public response before discussing it in the House. Another member, Chandra Mandal, questioned the idea, saying that even India has *pandits* but they did not put forward such demands as the *ulema* in Pakistan.<sup>67</sup> He insisted that individuals do have religion but the State did not. B.K. Dutta, during his speech, emphasised that, 'I feel I have every reason to believe that were this Resolution to come before this House within the Lifetime of the Great creator of Pakistan, the Quaid-

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<sup>64</sup> Leonard Binder, *Religion and Politics in Pakistan*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1963, p. 140.

<sup>65</sup> Kausar Parveen, 'The Role of Opposition in Constitution Making: Debate on the Objective Resolution', *Pakistan Vision*, 11 (1), 2010, pp. 142–163.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> 'Objective Resolution: The Raison De'tre or Coup De'tat' Available at [https://www.academia.edu/11762166/Objectives\\_Resolution\\_Raison\\_d%C3%AAtre\\_or\\_coup\\_d%C3%A9tat](https://www.academia.edu/11762166/Objectives_Resolution_Raison_d%C3%AAtre_or_coup_d%C3%A9tat) (Accessed on 15 May 2025).

e-Azam, it would not have been its present shape'.<sup>68</sup> He went on to underline the dangerous mix of politics and religion and stated that, 'Politics and religion belong to different regions of mind ... Politics belongs to the domain of reason, but you mix it with religion ... You (have) condemned us forever to as inferior status'.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, S.C. Chattopadhyaya argued that, 'You are determined to create a Herrenvolk ... This resolution in its present form epitomises the spirit of reaction. That spirit will not remain confined to precincts of this House. It will send its waves to the countryside as well'.<sup>70</sup>

On the question of mixing religion and politics, the right-wing elements in Pakistan often quote Muhammad Iqbal, who proclaimed *Juda Hon Deen Siyasat Se, To Rah Jati Hai Changezēe* [Politics sans religion results in chaos, anarchy and disorder]. Interestingly, this is only the second part of the couplet. The original couplet reads *Jallah Badshahi Ho Ya Jambori Tamasha Ho; Juda Hon Deen Siyasat Se, To Rah Jati Hai Changezēe*, which translates to 'whether it is Monarchy or Democracy, governance sans the ethical framework of religion results in chaos, anarchy and disorder'.<sup>71</sup> Well-meaning Muslim members too raised a number of pertinent questions and proposed several amendments, yet those were brushed aside by Liaquat Ali Khan, who argued that 'Pakistan was founded because the Muslims of this subcontinent wanted to build their lives in accordance with the teachings and traditions of Islam'.<sup>72</sup> This reflected the growing influence of right-wing elements in Pakistan. The Muslim League, which had no real political base in the territories that became Pakistan, succumbed to the pressures soon after the demise of Jinnah.

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<sup>68</sup> K. Parveen, 'The Role of Opposition in Constitution Making: Debate on the Objective Resolution', *Pakistan Vision*, 11 (1), 2010, pp. 142–163.

<sup>69</sup> Mubarak Ali, *Pakistan: In Search of Identity*, Aakar Books, Delhi, 2011, p. 28.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Iqramul Haq, 'The Lost Dream of an Egalitarian State', *The Friday Times*, 14 August 2024, available at: <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/14-Aug-2024/the-lost-dream-of-an-egalitarian-state> (Accessed on 26 September 2024).

<sup>72</sup> M. Haq, 'Some Reflections on Islam and Constitution Making in Pakistan: 1947-56', *Islamic Studies*, 5, 1996, pp. 209–220.

All the proposed amendments, by both the non-Muslims and well-meaning Muslims, were thoroughly rejected by a margin of 21 to 10 votes. When the Objectives Resolution was placed on the floor of the house for approval, a clear division emerged, with all the non-Muslim members voting against it and Muslim members voting in its favour. Thus, the Resolution was adopted on 12 March 1949 with a majority vote. This foundational document firmly stated:

Whereas sovereignty over the entire universe belongs to God Almighty alone and the authority which He has delegated to the State of Pakistan through its people for being exercised within the limit prescribed by Him is a sacred trust ... Whereas the principles of democracy, freedom, equality, tolerance and social justice, as enunciated by Islam, shall be fully observed.<sup>73</sup>

### **The *Khatm-e-Nabuwwat* Movement**

The passing of the Objectives Resolution emboldened the conservative segments, especially the religious right, in Pakistan which, over the years, went on to significantly increase its bargaining capacity *vis-à-vis* existing liberal, democratic and progressive constituencies in the country. Later, the Objectives Resolution was incorporated as the Preamble to the Constitution of Pakistan. All three Constitutions that Pakistan has had so far contain this Preamble. Civil–military elites, from time to time, used radical elements of all hues in one way or the other. At times, they were required to maintain or gain political legitimacy at home, at others, they were simply used to discredit a ruling dispensation. On some occasions, they were even used to fully exploit an emerging geopolitical situation in the region to consolidate and strengthen Pakistan’s bargaining position at the international stage. Moreover, their utility in creating and sustaining the anti-India narrative in the country and driving recruitment for the *jihad* industry in Kashmir and Afghanistan made them indispensable for the powers that be.

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<sup>73</sup> Government of Pakistan, The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, National Assembly, Islamabad, 2012, p. 1, available at: [https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1333523681\\_951.pdf](https://na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1333523681_951.pdf) (Accessed on 17 October 2024).

Many within the liberal and progressive sections of the Pakistani society opine that the passing of Objectives Resolution soon resulted in an anti-Ahmadiyya campaign in the country and paved way for the accommodation of many irrational demands of the religious right. The declaration of the Ahmadiyya community as non-Muslim by the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto government, attempts to Islamise the Pakistani society and most of its institutions by Gen. Zia-ul-Haq and the passing of Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill in the recent past by the Shehbaz Sharif government, which strengthened the blasphemy laws, indicate that the ruling elites in Pakistan have not made any genuine efforts to earnestly deal with the issues of radicalization and sectarianism in the country. Instead, cases of societal radicalism and sectarianism are often treated as law-and-order issues.

Majlis-e-Ahrar-e-Islam, a religious political party founded in British India, took the lead in the anti-Ahmadiyya campaign in Pakistan. It launched the movement for *Khatm-e-Nabuwat*, which united various sects and sub-sects of Islam against the Ahmadiyya community in the country. *Khatm-e-Nabuwat* refers to the belief that Hazarat Muhammad is the last of the prophets in Islam. It is believed that the Allah Almighty terminated the appointments of Prophets and Messengers and Hazarat Muhammad's prophethood would last until the Day of Judgement; moreover, only those who believe in *Khatm-e-Nabuwat* can claim to be a Muslim. Interestingly, Ahmadis consider Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian as a Prophet and the promised Messiah, which contradicts most of the other sects and sub-sects of Islam.

The first major issue came up in January 1952 when *ulema* belonging to different political and religious outfits asked Prime Minister Khwaja Nazimuddin to remove Foreign Minister Chaudhari Zafrullah Khan along with other Ahmadis occupying key posts in the government and declare the Ahmadis as non-Muslims. The demand was repeated in several meetings with the Prime Minister. In one such meeting, which took place on 16 August 1952, Khwaja Nazimuddin disappointed the *ulema*, stating that

The question whether Ahmadis should be declared a non-Muslim minority was for the Constituent Assembly and that he was not willing to make any move in that direction. Chaudhri Zafrullah

Khan, he said, had been appointed by the Quaid-i-Azam himself and therefore he would not remove him. As regards the removal of Ahmadi officers from key posts, he pointed out that the deputationists will have to make out a case on the merits.<sup>74</sup>

They also threatened direct action if their demands were not met in a month. When their demands were not met, the anti-Ahmadiyya leaders organized a meeting under the banner of All Pakistan Muslim Parties Convention on 18 January 1953 in Karachi and passed a resolution which called for *rast iqdam* [direct action]. It categorically stated:

... that since in view of the attitude of Khawaja Nazimuddin, Prime Minister of Pakistan, there is no hope of the demands in respect of the *Mirzais* being accepted, the All Muslim Parties Convention comes to the conclusion that in the circumstances *rast iqdam* has become inevitable to secure acceptance of the demands.<sup>75</sup>

The convention also constituted a Central Majlis-e-Amal to give effect to this resolution. The Majlis-e-Amal communicated the final ultimatum to Khwaja Nazimuddin on 22 January. The Justice Munir Commission Report terms this ultimatum as ‘a notice of civil revolt’.<sup>76</sup> This followed a strong anti-Ahmadiyya movement in the country, which surprisingly found many takers within the government. There was no serious effort on part of the federal government as well as provincial government in Punjab to dissuade those involved in the movement to declare a community non-Muslim due to certain differences. For instance, the Punjab Chief Minister, Mumtaz Daultana, supported the demand. Various government departments, including the education department of Punjab province, funded newspapers that were actively engaged in whipping up public sentiments against the Ahmadi community. By

<sup>74</sup> Government of Pakistan, *Report of the Court of Enquiry Constituted under Punjab Act II of 1954 to Enquire into Punjab Disturbances of 1953*, Government of Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan, p. 129.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 240.

March 1953, the movement turned violent and the Punjab provincial government lost control over the developing situation, which led to the imposition of martial law in the province on 6 March. The military brought the situation under control within six hours and the government in June 1953 constituted a Court of Inquiry under the chairmanship of Justice Muhammad Munir.

The Commission thoroughly examined dozens of *ulema* and religio-political parties belonging to different sects and sub-sects of Islam, including Ahmadis. Prominent among them were Maulana Abua Ala Maududi, Ata Ullah Shah Bukhari, Maulana Abul Hasnat, Daud Ghaznawi, Maulana Muhammad Zakir, Nur-ul-Hasan Shah Bukhari, Mufti Muhammad Hasan, Mufti Muhammad Idris, Maulana Ahmad Ali, Sulaiman Nadawi, Mufti Shafi and Ghazi Siraj ud Din.<sup>77</sup> The Munir Commission Report became important in many ways due its attempts to understand the definition of Muslim and its intention to deal with the questions related to Pakistan's identity as an Islamic state.

Contrary to the general expectations, the Commission could not arrive at a common definition of a Muslim that was accepted to all without any significant reservation. The *ulema* were too divided to arrive at a consensus. The divisions were so deep that accepting the definition of one *ulema* or sect would have resulted in all others being declared non-Muslims. The Commission concluded that it could be disastrous for the nascent state of Pakistan to discriminate among its citizens on the basis of faith and that the Islamic state as envisioned by the *ulema* was not at all feasible.<sup>78</sup> The Munir Commission Report exposed the vulnerability of a society that once thought of using religion to unite everyone under Islam.

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<sup>77</sup> Ali Usman Qasmi, *The Ahmadis and the Politics of Religious Exclusion in Pakistan*, Anthem Press, London, 2015, pp. 13–14.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19.

## DECLARATION OF AHMADIS AS NON-MUSLIM

Although the *Khatm-e-Nabuwat* movement failed to achieve its goal of declaring Ahmadis as non-Muslims in 1953, no meaningful lessons were learned from the crisis, and those at the helm became complacent once the violent situation came under control. The political instability and uncertainty continued. After Khawaja Nazimuddin, Mohammad Ali Bogra, Chaudhary Mohammad Ali, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardi, Ibrahim Ismail Chundrigar and Firoz Khan Noon served as prime ministers in succession, before the military took the reins of power in Pakistan. General Ayub Khan and General Yahya Khan trampled upon democratic and constitutional values, which led to the secession of East Pakistan in December 1971. The creation of Bangladesh buried the logic of the 'Two-Nation Theory' and placed a huge question mark on the Pakistan's identity and ideology. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who commanded the reins of power in a truncated Pakistan, had the opportunity to address certain critical issues, including the military's interference in politics, yet he proved no different than others. He too succumbed to the pressures of the religious right in the country and tried to woo them for consolidating his own position in the country.

When the Ahmadiyya issue re-emerged about two decades later, instead of using force to bring the situation under control, Bhutto used the parliament as an instrument to seek a solution. It is important to note that, in May 1974, some students of the Nishtar Medical College clashed with Ahmadi youth at the Rabwah railway station. This sparked violent protests against the Ahmadiyya community by the rest of the majority Muslim sects. Many accused Bhutto for being soft on Ahmadis as they had supported his party in the 1970 elections. Bhutto, on his part, saw the protests as a conspiracy to remove him from power. He immediately constituted an inquiry commission under Justice Samdani to investigate the Rabwah incident. However, after initial hearings, the *Majlis-e-Amal* boycotted the proceedings, fearing a repeat of the Munir Commission outcome. On 12 June 1974, several members of the Punjab Assembly presented a motion to declare the Ahmadis non-Muslim. The very next day, Bhutto appeared on TV and radio and, during his address, stated that the issue had been around for 90 years and could not be solved in a day. He suggested to refer the issue to the Advisory Council of Islamic Ideology (ACII). However, after the 14

June strike by the majority sects, he succumbed to the pressures and allowed the issue to be discussed in the parliament itself.<sup>79</sup> The parliamentary proceedings led to the Second Constitutional Amendment in the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan. Through the Amendment, a clause to Article 260 was inserted to define a Muslim and, by extension, a non-Muslim. The Article 260 (3a) and (3b) now reads:

“Muslim” means a person who believes in the unity and oneness of Almighty Allah, in the absolute and unqualified finality of the Prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him), the last of the prophets, and does not believe, in or recognize as a prophet or religious reformer, any person who claimed or claims to be a prophet, in any sense of the word or of any description whatsoever, after Muhammad (peace be upon him); and “non-Muslim” means a person who is not a Muslim and includes a person belonging to the Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist or Parsi community, a person of the Qadiani group or the Lahori group (who call themselves ‘Ahmadis’ or by any other name), or a Bahai, and a person belonging to any of the scheduled castes.<sup>80</sup>

Thus, the Ahmadis were declared non-Muslim, paving the way for their constant harassment and persecution, which continues to this day. With the success of *Khatm-e-Nabuwat*, the sectarian genie, as the proverb goes, was out of the bottle. This not only emboldened the religious right in the country but also gave them the confidence to directly take on the State to fulfil their demands, irrespective of their constitutional and legal merits.

## THE GROWING RADICALISATION

Analysts believe that the Pakistani society is undergoing a radical shift with the rise of sectarian tendencies and growing extremism in the

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<sup>79</sup> Nadeem F. Paracha, “The 1974 Ouster of the ‘Heretics’: What Really Happened?”, *Dawn*, 21 November 2023, available at: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1057427> (Accessed on 11 December 2023).

<sup>80</sup> Article 260 of the Constitution of Pakistan.

society. Historically, several factors, both internal and external, have been responsible for the radicalization and sectarian violence witnessed in Pakistan. The changing geopolitical dynamics has definitely played a role in worsening the sectarian divisions in the country. However, one should not look the other way when it comes to analysing certain policy decisions made by the politico-security elites in the country. The perceptive Pakistani journalist, late Khaled Ahmed, ascribes this factor as 'Jihad and sectarianism intermingled in Pakistan'.<sup>81</sup> It is an established fact that, both in Afghanistan and Kashmir, *jihad* was a state project duly sanctioned by the politico-security elites. The project was largely implemented by the sectarian outfits belonging to Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith schools associated with Sunni Islam.<sup>82</sup>

Amir Rana is of the view that people in present-day Pakistan are increasingly becoming sensitive to their religious and sectarian identity.<sup>83</sup> One can also note that, at times, extremist outfits of a particular sect(s) (irrespective of their intra-sectarian differences) have come together to target minorities from other Islamic sects as well as other religions. For example, the Sunnis (both Deobandi and Barelvi) as well as Shias came together in the *Khatm-e-Nabuwat* movement in the 1950 to declare the minority Ahmadiyya sect un-Islamic. Once this goal was achieved, the Shias faced the brunt of the Sunnis. They also periodically turn against minority Hindus and Christians. Amongst the Shias, the Hazara Shias have historically been discriminated for their sectarian affiliation. They have also been easy targets due to their distinctive Central Asian facial features. Many analysts consider the Shia–Sunni conflict in Pakistan as a by-product of the sectarian tensions that emerged in the wake of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. It is also seen by some as a result of the wider Saudi–Iran rivalry in the Muslim world. However, some others

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<sup>81</sup> Khaled Ahmed, *Sectarian War: Pakistan's Sunni-Shia Violence and Its Links to the Middle East*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2011, p. 114.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Muhammad Amir Rana, 'Threat of Religious Extremism', in Maleeha Lodhi (Ed.) *Pakistan: The Search for Stability*, Hurst & Company, London, 2024.

argue that Gen. Zia-ul-Haq's Islamisation programme worsened the divide.

## SHIA–SUNNI DIVIDE

The Shia–Sunni sectarian divide has historically been considered as one of the most complex issues within Islam. Saudi Arabia and Iran are known to have intensified this division over the years. This geopolitical rivalry and competition to gain influence in the larger Muslim society has stoked sectarian tension and conflict in several states, including Pakistan. The 1979 Iranian Revolution, which brought Ayatollah Khomeini into prominence, coincided with Gen. Zia-ul-Haq's Islamisation programme in Pakistan. It was also the time when Pakistan had become the frontline state in the 'Holy Afghan Jihad', which required its active support for Sunni militant outfits backed by the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. In response to the growing influence and strength of Sunni Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), Shia outfits such as Sipah-e-Muhammad Pakistan (SMP) and Tehreek-e-Fiqah-e-Jafari (TNFJ) came to the fore. The 1980s became known for the increased sectarian violence between Sunni- and Shia-affiliated groups in Pakistan. Shia Hazaras, in particular, due to their distinguishable features, were at the receiving end of the Sunni militant groups' target killings.

Justice Ali Nawaz Chowhan, chairman of the National Commission for Human Rights, Pakistan, regarding a February 2018 report on Hazaras, categorically stated that, 'Prolonged, unchecked dogmatic bigotry has led to a sharp increase in sectarian violence in Pakistan, particularly between Shia and Sunni sects'.<sup>84</sup> He even claimed that Hazaras had been consistently targeted since 1999, leading to more than 2,000 being killed in the last 14 years.<sup>85</sup> The situation worsened particularly during the post-9/11 period, when various religious extremists and terror outfits joined hands. It was during this period that Lashkar-e-

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<sup>84</sup> NCHRP, *Understanding the Agonies of Ethnic Hazaras*, National Commission for Human Rights, Islamabad, 2018, p. v.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

Jhangvi (Lej) became quite active and started openly targeting Shias throughout the country.<sup>86</sup>

Due to the unabated persecution of Hazaras in the country, the Supreme Court had to take *suo motu* notice of the situation on 2 May 2018. During the hearing of the case, Chief Justice Saqib Nisar remarked: 'For me the targeted killings of the Hazara community in Quetta is ethnic cleansing and that is why I had to take *suo motu* notice. We have no words to condemn the killings of Hazaras'.<sup>87</sup> It is also important to note that this *suo motu* notice came after Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa met civil rights activists Jalila Haider and other protesters in Quetta.<sup>88</sup> However, nothing has changed on the ground even after the *suo motu* notice and the targeted killings of Shias continue.

The recent round of Shia–Sunni sectarian violence took place in Kurram district of KP province, which has so far resulted in over 1,000 deaths. In September 2024, tribes belonging to the Sunni sect targeted Shias in Parachinar, which resulted in the death of 46 people, including 41 from the Shia community.<sup>89</sup> This was followed by an attack on a passenger vehicle in the Kunj Alizai area on 12 October 2024, in which at least 15 people were killed and many others injured.<sup>90</sup> Tensions reached a new height on 21 November 2024, when a 200-vehicle convoy was

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>87</sup> Muhammad Zafar, 'CJP Calls Killing of Hazaras "Ethnic Cleansing"', *The Express Tribune*, 11 May 2018, available at: <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1707695/hazara-killings-tantamount-ethnic-cleansing-cjp> (Accessed on 29 May 2025).

<sup>88</sup> Imad Zafar, '509 Hazaras Killed in Five Years and Pakistan is Still Not Ready to Wake Up', *The Express Tribune*, 5 March 2021, available at <https://tribune.com.pk/article/66481/509-hazaras-killed-in-five-years-and-pakistan-is-still-not-ready-to-wake-up> (Accessed on 2 June 2024).

<sup>89</sup> Arun Anand, 'Kurram Violence: Sunni Establishment's War Against Shias in Pakistan', *News18*, 26 November 2024.

<sup>90</sup> Abid Hussain, 'Why Sectarian Tensions Continue to Simmer in Pakistan's Kurram District', *Al Jazeera*, 12 November 2024.

ambushed, claiming 41 lives, including seven women and a minor girl.<sup>91</sup> An inquiry report by Pakistan's National Commission for Human Rights underlined the root causes behind the violence, which included, *inter alia*, the deepening sectarian rift between the Sunni and Shia tribes.<sup>92</sup> The report also claimed that the Sunni tribes have gradually expanded their presence in the region, which led to the confining of Shia tribes to limited areas of Parachinar and Ali Sherzai in Upper and Lower Kurram, respectively.<sup>93</sup>

## INTRA-SECT DIVISIONS

Besides the prominent Shia–Sunni divide, Pakistan has also witnessed intra-sect divisions culminating in conflicts. It is important to note that, in the run up to the creation of Pakistan, there was a clear division within the Deobandi school, but the Barelvis always supported the idea of a separate state for the Muslims. It is quite another thing that after Pakistan came into existence, Deobandis came to dominate the political discourse in the country.<sup>94</sup> The Muslim population in Pakistan is roughly about 96 per cent, out of which 80–85 per cent follow Sunni schools of thought and 15–20 per cent follow the Shia schools of thought.<sup>95</sup> The Sunni Sufi and Barelvis are estimated to comprise around 50–60 per cent of the population, followed by Deobandis at 15–20 per cent and Ahl-e-Hadith/Salafi/Wahabi at about 5 per cent.<sup>96</sup> As far as the Sunni sect is concerned, there is a huge difference in the

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<sup>91</sup> Flora Drury, 'More than 40 Dead after Gunmen Attack Passenger Vehicles in Pakistan', *BBC*, 22 November 2024.

<sup>92</sup> NCHR, *Inquiry Report on the Longstanding Humanitarian Crisis in Kurram District*, National Commission for Human Rights, Islamabad, 2024, p. 3.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Ashok K. Behuria, 'Sect Within Sect: The Case of Debandi-Barelvi Encounter in Pakistan', *Strategic Analysis*, 32(1), 2008, pp. 57–80.

<sup>95</sup> Government of the United States (2021), *2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Pakistan*, Department of State, Washington D.C., p. 4.

<sup>96</sup> Jawad Syed, 'Barelvi Militancy in Pakistan and Salmaan Taseer's Murder', in Jawad Syed et al. (eds), *Faith-Based Violence and Deobandi Militancy in Pakistan*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016.

teachings, practices and interpretation of the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi and Hanbali schools.<sup>97</sup> The two most-prominent Sunni sub-sects – Deobandi and Barelvi – follow the Hanafi school of Islam. Taliban and other hardliners in Pakistan are associated with Deobandi and *takfiri* (excommunicator) beliefs and consider the Barelvis as ‘irredeemable heretics’.<sup>98</sup>

About 90 per cent of all indigenous terror activities as well as cross-border terrorism inside India and Afghanistan are carried out by Deobandi outfits, such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Punjabi Taliban, Sipah-e-Sahba Pakistan (SSP), Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), Lashkar-e-Toiba, Lashkar-e-Islam (LeI), The Resistance Force (TRF), etc. A large number of Sufi religious sites came under attack by the Deobandi outfits. The prominent ones include Data Darbar (Lahore), Lal Shahbaz Qalandar Shrine (Sehwan), Abdullah Shah Ghazi Shrine (Karachi), Bari Imam Tomb (Islamabad), Rahman Baba Shrine (Peshawar), Sakhi Sarwar Shrine (Dera Ghazi Khan), Baba Farid Ganj Shakar Shrine (Pakpattan), Shah Noorani Shrine (Khuzdar) and Pir Rakhel Shah (Balochistan).

The Barelvis responded to the Deobandi assertions firstly by forging unity among themselves and then taking measures to counter their co-religionists from the other sub-sect. The Sunni Tehreek (ST) represents an aggressive version of the Barelvi faith. In 1990, Muhammad Saleem Qadri established ST in Karachi with the aim of safeguarding religio-political rights of the Barelvi movement in Pakistan. In 1992, the first direct confrontation between Barelvi and Deobandi groups occurred in Karachi, when Barelvis claimed the Noor Masjid at Ranchor Lines as their own. The ST was able to wrest control of over five dozen mosques from Deobandis within a decade.<sup>99</sup> There are a large number

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<sup>97</sup> Zulqarnain Sewag, ‘Intra-Sunni Conflicts in Pakistan’, in Jawad Syed et al. (eds), *Faith-Based Violence and Deobandi Militancy in Pakistan*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> William Kesler Jackson, *A Subcontinent's Sunni Schism: The Deobandi-Barelvi Rivalry and the Creation of Modern South Asia*, Dissertation, Syracuse University, 2013, p. 461. S

of disputed mosques in Pakistan over which both Deobandi and Barelvi groups question each other's authority. These disputes sometimes lead to violent clashes and target killings. On 11 April 2006, a suicide bomber targeted a Barelvi gathering commemorating the 12th Rabiul Awwal at Nishtar Park, Karachi,<sup>100</sup> resulting in the deaths of at least 57 people. Fingers were pointed towards Deobandi LeJ, as the suicide bomber was affiliated with the outfit. Muhammad Saleem Qadri, the founder of ST, was gunned down in May 2011 allegedly by the SSP. Over the years, the Barelvis became quite assertive and made concerted efforts to increase their influence in the society. In order to achieve this objective, they chose the sensitive issue of blasphemy and mobilised people around it.

The former Punjab Governor, Salman Taseer, was assassinated by his bodyguard, Mumtaz Qadri, because he criticised blasphemy laws and extended his support to Asia Bibi, a Christian woman who was sentenced to death under the law for blasphemy. On 1 August 2015, Khadim Hussain Rizvi, along with over six dozen people, laid the foundation of Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). It did not take TLP much time to rise in prominence in Pakistan due to the tacit support it received from the country's security establishment. In the 2018 elections, it received 2.13 million votes, whereas the 2024 election saw the party getting 2.89 million votes.<sup>101</sup> Of the total, 2.42 million votes came from the Punjab province and 0.32 million from Sindh,<sup>102</sup> indicating its growing acceptability in the largest and politically important provinces.

## THE PLIGHT OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

When it comes to the religious minorities, they appear to be at the receiving end of discrimination and violence in the country. They are

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<sup>100</sup> Ishaq Tanoli, '2006 Nishtar Park Bombing Case Still Pending', *Dawn*, 14 January 2014, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1080302>.

<sup>101</sup> Gallup Pakistan, 'Special Press Release', 12 March 2024, available at <https://gallup.com.pk/post/36181> (Accessed on 15 March 2024).

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

the ones who often bear the brunt of rising radicalisation in the country, with radical forces often misusing blasphemy laws to target them. In many cases, the accused are tortured to death in the streets of Pakistan. Close to 2,000 people were booked under the cases of blasphemy between 1987 and 2021, of which about 33 per cent cases were registered against the Ahmadis, 14.5 per cent against Christians and a little over 2 per cent against Hindus.<sup>103</sup> Around 84 of these accused were extrajudicially killed in the streets of Pakistan by mobs that primarily comprised religious extremists and radicals.<sup>104</sup>

On 16 August 2023, armed radical extremist groups attacked churches and looted and burned several homes of people belonging to the Christian community in Jaranwala, Faisalabad.<sup>105</sup> This was prompted by an alleged act of blasphemy by two members of the community. As soon as the news spread, TLP activists gathered in the locality and made announcements against the Christian community from the mosque's loudspeakers, which led to quick mobilisation of radical forces and culminated into a large-scale attack against the Christian community in Jaranwala. The state institutions remained passive spectators, while the local administration was seen making attempts to negotiate with extremists, that too, from a position of weakness.<sup>106</sup> Subsequently, the National Commission of Human Rights (NCHR) visited the incident site and prepared a report, which established that a mob of around 1,200 people attacked the Christian locality and burned down at least 22 churches and 80 homes. The report also made it clear that the case

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<sup>103</sup> Center for Social Justice, *Human Rights Observer 2022: A Factsheet on the Rights of Religious Minorities in Pakistan*, CSJ report, Lahore, 2022, p. 17.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Abid Hussain, 'Mobs Burn Christian Churches, Homes in Pakistan after Blasphemy Allegations', *Al Jazeera*, 16 August 2023, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/16/angry-mobs-burn-christian-churches-in-pakistan-after-blasphemy-allegations> (Accessed on 18 August 2023).

<sup>106</sup> Umair Javed, 'Who Set Fire to Jaranwala?', *The Dawn*, 21 August 2023, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1771334/who-set-fire-to-jaranwala> (Accessed on 23 August 2023).

of blasphemy against the two Christian youth was actually rooted in a financial dispute between the Christian youth and a Muslim travel agent.<sup>107</sup> The report also underlined that loudspeaker announcements from local mosques were used by the radicals to incite religious sentiments.<sup>108</sup>

Ever since the government promulgated an Ordinance to amend Pakistan Penal Code to criminalize certain religious activities of Ahmadis in April 1984, societal discrimination, harassment, targeted violence and persecution of the group has somewhat become a new norm in Pakistan. In July 2023, at least five cases were filed in Punjab province against members of Ahmadi community for sacrificing animals on the occasion of Eid-ul-Azha.<sup>109</sup> Section 298-C of the Pakistani Penal Code (PPC) dwells on the penalty for Ahmadis identifying themselves as Muslims or preaching or propagating their faith. In September 2023, the NCHR undertook a fact-finding mission in Rabwah, Punjab, with an explicit objective of investigating a myriad of human rights violations against the Ahmadiyya community. The mission underlined the fact that the Ahmadis faced an astonishing number of legal charges, including 765 cases for displaying the *Kalima*, 47 cases for calling the *Azhan* and 861 cases for preaching.<sup>110</sup> The mission also established that at least 51 Ahmadiyya places of worship were demolished and another 46 sealed by the authorities. Additionally, 39 places of worship were set on fire/damaged and 18 forcibly occupied, indicating a systematic effort to eradicate the Ahmadiyya's places of worship.<sup>111</sup> The hatred

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<sup>107</sup> NCHR, *Jarannala: Incident Report*, National Commission for Human Rights, Islamabad, 2023, p. 4.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Imran Babol, 'At Least 5 Cases Filed Against Members of Ahmadi Community in Punjab for Sacrificing Animals on Eidul Azha', *Dawn*, 2 July 2023, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1762570> (Accessed on 13 July 2023).

<sup>110</sup> NCHR, *Situation Report: Monitoring the Plight of the Ahmadiyya Community*, National Commission for Human Rights, Islamabad, 2023, p.6.

towards the community is so palpable at various levels in the country that often it leads to denial of burial, exhuming of buried bodies and desecration of graves belonging to the Ahmadiyya community. The NHRC report states that, 'Disturbingly, 99 Ahmadi graves have been desecrated and damaged in the current year alone, emphasizing the nature of the assault on their dignity, even in death according to various reports'.<sup>112</sup>

In June 2024, on complaints of TLP leaders, the police conducted raids on several Ahmadiyya households across Punjab to ensure that members of the community did not engage in practices that were considered 'Islamic'.<sup>113</sup> A person in Gojra of Toba Tek Singh district was charged on 17 June 2024 for sacrificing a goat in his home on Eid-ul-Azha. The complainant, a TLP leader, in the First Information Report (FIR) stated that he was informed about the goat sacrifice by an Ahmadi. The person stood firm, even after warning, and called himself a Muslim, which 'hurt the sentiments of Muslims by sacrificing an animal and calling [himself] to be a Muslim'.<sup>114</sup> Human rights organizations have documented at least 36 cases of arbitrary arrests and detention, in addition to dozens of cases of police harassment of Ahmadis, in June 2024. Amnesty International states that, 'these incidents of human rights violations by district administrations across Pakistan have demonstrated a pattern that Ahmadis remain one of the most systematically discriminated communities in Pakistan'.<sup>115</sup> Instead of ending discrimination, the authorities throughout the country took

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> 'Ahmadi Community Faces Raids, Harassment during Eid ul Adha Celebrations', *The Express Tribune*, 20 June 2024.

<sup>114</sup> Imran Gabol, 'FIR Registered in Toba Tek Against Member of Ahmadi Community for Sacrificing Goat on Eidul Azha', *Dawn*, 18 June 2024, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1840568> (Accessed on 23 June 2024).

<sup>115</sup> Amnesty International, 'Pakistan: Authorities Must End Escalating Attacks on Minority Ahmadiyya Community', 21 June 2024, available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/06/end-escalating-attacks-on-minority-ahmadiyya-community/> (Accessed on 24 June 2024).

additional measures to stop Ahmadis from celebrating Eid-ul-Azha on 7 June 2025. These measures also included forcible signing of affidavits by Ahmadis to stop them from offering Eid prayers, purchasing and sacrificing animals on Eid-ul-Azha.<sup>116</sup> There were also reports of violence against Ahmadis by the majoritarian religious groups in April 2025, resulting in the loss of lives.

It is important to note that such incidents continue to occur in Pakistan, despite the fact that in 2022, the Supreme Court had ruled that obstructing non-Muslims from practicing their religion within the confines of their place of worship was against the Constitution. In *Tabir Naqash, etc. vs The State, etc.* case, two members of a bench of the Supreme Court, Justice Syed Mansoor Ali Shah and Justice Amin-ud-Din Khan, ruled on 12 January 2022 that:

To deprive a non-Muslim of our country from holding his religious beliefs, to obstruct him from professing and practicing his religion within the four walls of his place of worship is against the grain of our democratic Constitution and repugnant to the spirit and character of our Islamic Republic ... Article 260 (3) of the Constitution though declares Ahmadis/Qadianis as non-Muslim, it neither disowns them as citizens of Pakistan nor deprives them of their entitlement to the fundamental rights guaranteed under the constitution.<sup>117</sup>

The blatant disregard of the orders of the highest court in Pakistan by the state institutions and law enforcement agencies indicates the extent of influence gained by religious extremists and sectarian outfits over the years in the country.

The sectarian divide in Pakistan has impacted even the functioning of various state institutions in the country, including the armed forces of

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<sup>116</sup> 'AI Asks Pakistan to End Action Against Ahmadis', *Dawn*, 6 June 2025, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1915666> (Accessed on 7 June 2025).

<sup>117</sup> Supreme Court Judgement in *Tabir Naqash, etc. vs The State, etc.* on 12 January 2022.

Pakistan. It was very much visible in the military's professional ranks, where Shia officers were rarely promoted beyond the Brigadier rank. The trend somewhat improved with time; however, it continues to influence postings and promotions in the armed forces. When Nawaz Sharif chose Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa as the Chief of Army Staff, there were rumours in some quarters about him being a 'Qadiani' i.e. Ahmadi. Interestingly, Major Khalid Shah, a retired army officer, filed a petition in Peshawar High Court alleging that Gen. Bajwa belong to the Ahmadi community and as per the Constitution, an Ahmadi cannot be appointed as the Army Chief.<sup>118</sup> The plea also alleged that Rizwan Akhtar, former DG-ISI, failed to perform his duties as Muslim by not informing the government about Bajwa's religious affiliation.<sup>119</sup> Earlier, the Imran Khan government was forced to remove Atif Mian, a Pakistani-American economist belonging to Ahmadi community, from his position as the economic advisor.<sup>120</sup>

The radical and sectarian fault line in Pakistan appears to be deepening. Although its violent manifestations may not be visible everywhere, except in some tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, societal relations have been affected by it in one way or the other. The intra-sect differences appear to be accentuating with the rise of Barelvi extremist outfits that are directly challenging the Deobandi influence in the Pakistani society. A recent study by Adil Najam underlines that about 40 per cent of young men and 50 per cent of young women disapprove of friendly relations

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<sup>118</sup> 'Plea Filed Against Pakistan Army Chief for Being Ahmadi Muslim', *The New Indian Express*, 22 November 2019, available at: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/world/2019/Nov/22/plea-filed-against-pakistan-army-chief-for-being-ahmadi-muslim-2065532.html> (Accessed on 2 December 2024).

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Asad Hashim, 'Bowing to Far-right Pressure, Pakistan Removes Ahmadi Adviser', *Al Jazeera*, 7 September 2018, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/9/7/bowing-to-far-right-pressure-pakistan-removes-ahmadi-adviser> (Accessed on 18 November 2024).

with people from other religions or for that matter even other sects.<sup>121</sup> The palpable youth bulge in Pakistan – which could otherwise be an important asset for the country’s growth and development – faces the risk of radicalisation in the absence of adequate training and employment opportunities on the one hand, and growing influence of radical forces in the society on the other. Pakistan needs to generate at least 1.5 million new jobs annually for the next two to three decades to tap into the potential of its young population. The 2024-25 Labour Force Survey (LFS) conducted by the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) revealed a staggering surge of 31 per cent in the unemployed population in Pakistan.<sup>122</sup> This was observed across all age groups and both genders over the last four years, which indicates a broad-based deterioration in labour market conditions.<sup>123</sup> Given the history and current situation, the civil–military elites appear to be focussing elsewhere. Radical extremists and terror outfits, in such a situation, appear to be better placed as far as the indoctrination of young minds are concerned. In the absence of a clear approach and targeted programme by the state, it is natural that these forces would take advantage of the situation and lure the young minds into their fold.

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<sup>121</sup> Adil Najam, note no. 13.

<sup>122</sup> Mubarak Zeb Khan, ‘1.4M More Jobless in Four Years’, *Dawn*, 26 November 2025, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1957383> (Accessed on 29 November 2025).

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

## THE ETHNIC FAULT LINE

The ethnic fault line is one of the most prominent in the Pakistani society, and the way politico-security elites of the country attempted to deal with it has already cost Pakistan almost half of its territory and more than half of its population. Despite the separation of East Pakistan in 1971, the nation remains a multi-ethnic society consisting of mainly Punjabi, Sindhi, Mohajir, Baloch and Pashtun ethnic groups. There are also some other smaller ethnic groups and sub-groups, such as Saraiki, Brahui, Hindokowan, Kalash, Shina and Burusho. Punjabis constitute about half of the population, followed by Pashtuns, Sindhis, Saraikis, Mohajirs, Baloch and others.<sup>124</sup> Historically, the politico-security elites found it difficult to accept the plural composition of the society and often refused to share power with minority ethnic groups, whom they considered inferior as well as incapable. Over the years, this has fuelled separatist/nationalist tendencies/movements in most of these groups, including Bengali, Mohajir, Sindhi, Pashtun and Baloch. Besides the separatist movements, there have historically been demands for the creation of new provinces based on ethno-linguistic identities. For example, people in South Punjab, especially in the Saraiki belt (Multan, Bahawalpur and Dera Ghazi Khan) aspire to have their own province so that the issues of economic growth and development and effective governance can be addressed properly.

Most of the mainstream parties, including PPP, PML-N and PTI, to some extent, are sympathetic to the demand for a separate province. Although the election manifestos of the parties did mention the issue, while in power, none of the parties actually took definitive steps to

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<sup>124</sup> 'People of Pakistan', *Britannica*, 22 February 2025, available at <https://www.britannica.com/place/Pakistan/People> (Accessed on 22 February 2025).

create a separate province. In 2013, even the Senate approved the 24th Constitutional Amendment Bill for the creation of Bahawalpur Janoobi province.<sup>125</sup> A private member bill was introduced in Senate in January 2022 to create a province in South Punjab. However, these steps fell short of meeting the demand of a separate Saraiki province in southern Punjab. In the run up to the February 2024 general elections, the Saraiki Student Alliance (SSA) and Saraiki Suba Sang Committee (SSSC) jointly organised a rally to bring the demand for a separate province to the forefront of discussions and debates. In the rally, slogans like *Maikoon Aakh Na Punj-Daryaaie* [Don't call me Punjabi] and *Assan Qaidee Takht Lahore Dey* [We are the prisoners of the Lahore Throne] were raised. However, the government has neither negated the demand nor taken significant steps to build a consensus over the issue.

Similarly, there have been demands for a separate province for the Hazaras and the Hindko-speaking people in the tribal borderlands. Interestingly, there was no administrative logic, cultural cohesion or economic alignment behind the inclusion of the Hazara division in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. Rather, it was the result of a historical accident and colonial expediency. Amjad Zaman Khan, the noted bibliophile, claims that, in 1901, when British created the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), the Hazara division was included due to two practical reasons: to monitor the Black Mountain region and to use Abbottabad as a summer headquarters for provincial administration.<sup>126</sup> These expediencies no longer require the region to be part of the KP. There is unanimity across the political spectrum in the Hazara division of KP over the issue.

In August 2025, almost all politicians from the Hazara division, irrespective of their party affiliations, renewed their demand for a

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<sup>125</sup> Zahid Gishkori, 'Bahawalpur South Punjab: New Province Bill Sails through the Senate', *The Express Tribune*, 6 March 2013, available at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/517000/bahawalpur-south-punjab-new-province-bill-sails-through-the-senate> (Accessed on 8 March 2025).

<sup>126</sup> Muhammad Sadaqat, 'Placing Hazara Under KP Traced to "Colonial Expediency"', *Dawn*, 8 December 2025, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1959769/placing-hazara-under-kp-traced-to-colonial-expediency> (Accessed on 10 December 2025).

separate province. In a press conference, Sardar Muhammad Yousuf, Minister for Religious Affairs and Chairman of Hazara Province Tehreek, argued that ‘Hazara fulfills all the conditions to be a province’.<sup>127</sup> The KP assembly has passed multiple resolutions in the past in favour of the creation of the Hazara province. On 1 December 2025, the assembly passed a unanimous resolution, demanding bifurcation of KP and creation of a new Hazara province out of it.<sup>128</sup> However, the politico-security elites in Islamabad and Rawalpindi have a different approach and are unwilling to address the longstanding demand for a separate province in the region. The Awami National Party (ANP), on 4 January 2025, rejected the resolution passed by the KP Assembly for the creation of a Hazara province.<sup>129</sup> Instead, it demanded the creation of new provinces on the basis of nationalities and called for a single, representative Pashtun unit stretching from Chaman to Waziristan and Chitral.<sup>130</sup> This is in line with ANP’s historical positions and signals the revival of Pashtun nationalist discourse in the region. However, under present circumstances, it also indicates that identity politics is being reasserted as a counterweight to administrative fragmentation. The demand for a Hazara province is rooted in calls for cultural and linguistic recognition, better governance and local empowerment.

In principle, all political parties agree to the creation of separate provinces, however, in practice, they avoid taking significant steps to address the issue once for all. As far as separatist movements are concerned, except the Bengalis, other ethnic groups could not succeed in carving out a separate state for themselves based on their proclaimed

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<sup>127</sup> Kalbe Ali, ‘Politicians from Hazara Renew Demand for New Province’, *Dawn*, 28 August 2025, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1937747> (Accessed on 29 August 2025).

<sup>128</sup> ‘K-P MPAs Unite in Demand for Hazara Province’, *The Express Tribune*, 2 December 2025, available at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2580113/k-p-mpas-unite-in-demand-for-hazara-province> (Accessed on 5 December 2025).

<sup>129</sup> ‘ANP Rejects Hazara Province Resolution’, *The Express Tribune*, 5 January 2026, available at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2585500/anp-rejects-hazara-province-resolution> (Accessed on 6 January 2026).

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

national identity. After the 1971 debacle and the creation of Bangladesh, the powerful security establishment adopted the twin approaches of 'brutal suppression' and 'occasional accommodation' towards other ethnic communities. Soon after the partition and creation of Pakistan, ethnic Sindhis found themselves in the eye of storm. Pakistan named its most important cosmopolitan city, Karachi, as its capital, which prompted a large number of Muslims migrating from India to settle in urban areas in and around Karachi. The migration and settlement of Urdu-speaking people in areas traditionally dominated by ethnic Sindhis inadvertently resulted in growing disgruntlement in Sindh, as its inhabitants feared being marginalised in their own land.

### **The Call for Sindhudesh**

G.M. Syed, who was a staunch supporter of the Pakistan project, began contemplating about Sindhi national identity soon after the partition. He even accused Liaqat Ali Khan of planning to colonise Sindh through the settlement of Urdu-speaking Mohajirs.<sup>131</sup> These fears were accentuated when the Mohajirs occupied important positions in the interim government and began to penetrate both the political and economic circles in the province. Their language, Urdu, too received undue favour and importance in the country. On 24 March 1948, Jinnah himself declared in Dhaka that Urdu alone would be the sole state language.<sup>132</sup> Through its first Constitution in 1956, Pakistan officially adopted Urdu as the national language of the country. By that time, to offshoot the majority of East Pakistan, Prime Minister Chaudhry Muhammad Ali had introduced the One Unit Plan in October 1955 to amalgamate Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan and erstwhile NWFP into one single unit as West Pakistan. This was seen by many smaller ethnicities as an assault on their own ethno-linguistic identities and culture. People in Sindh, Balochistan and NWFP were on the same page on this issue. In 1972, G.M. Syed founded an organisation called Jeay Sindh Mahaz,

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<sup>131</sup> G.M. Syed, note no. 19, p. 14.

<sup>132</sup> Javed Jabbar, 'Time to Revisit Jinnah and the Issue of Language', *Dawn*, 25 December 2022, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1736213> (Accessed on 30 April 2023).

which was aimed to advance the cause of Sindhi nationalism and advocate the independence of Sindh. Soon, he became restless and categorically argued for a separate Sindhudesh. To support this argument, he stated that Sindh:

... has a civilization over 5000 years old. It has a culture, language and the magnificent past, which any nation and any country in the world would feel the greatest of pride to own and cherish. Sindh has a highly rich and productive soil. It has loving laborious people. Its language, its culture, its people, mineral wealth, its agriculture and its Sea trade and rich marine life all these are the result of natural growth spread millions of years. The land and the people of Sindh are under no obligation for their life and existence to Dr. Iqbal, Mr. Jinnah or any other persons of that ilk ... The Sindhi mind is there a free mind, a tolerant mind, a mind surcharged with spirit of equality, patriotism and a living urge for freedom. The people of this land are not prepared to live as slaves, whether such a slavery is imposed on them in the name of religion, or that of Pakistan much less under the fraud of Muslim nationhood.<sup>133</sup>

Syed was the first politician in post-1971 Pakistan who championed the separatist movement. He went on to identify five distinct principles, which in his opinion were recognised across the globe as essential elements for nationhood, including a separate homeland, distinct language and culture, historical traditions and special politico-economic interests.<sup>134</sup> He did not trust the Punjabi-Pathan-dominated Army that had launched a brutal crackdown on Bengalis and Baloch alike. He was even disappointed with a fellow Sindhi politician, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, for the way he compromised with the Army to fulfil his quest for power.<sup>135</sup> Pakistan's response to Sindhi nationalism was to divide

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<sup>133</sup> G.M. Syed, note no. 19, pp. 33–34.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>135</sup> Julien Levesque, 'Beyond Success or Failure: Sindhi Nationalism and the Social Construction of the "Idea of Sindh"', *Journal of Sindhi Studies*, 2021, pp. 1–33.

and co-opt and it succeeded in creating divisions within the movement. During the lifetime of Syed, at least three factions led by Dr Arbab Khuhawar, Dr Hameeda Khuhro and Abdul Wahid Arisar emerged.<sup>136</sup> Dr. Khuhawar was the first to break away to form his own Sindh Watan Dost Party in 1979. Dr. Khuhro and Arisar, while remaining part of Jeay Sindh Mahaz, led two separate factions comprising the feudals and middle class, respectively.<sup>137</sup> Besides, a substantial chunk of the population was influenced by Bhutto's socialist tilt and slogans like *Roti, Kapda, Makan*. Nationalist feelings took the front seat when Gen. Zia-ul-Haq came to power by overthrowing the Bhutto government and later executing him through a fraudulent judicial trial. When the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD) was launched in 1983, it became immensely popular in Sindh, inviting a brutal response from the military regime. Additionally, the military encouraged the Mohajir constituency to make a dent in the idea of unified Sindhi nationalism. The combination of all these worked to ensure that the demand of Sindhudesh did not go too far.

## MOHAJIR NATIONALISM

The Urdu-speaking Mohajir community played an important role in projecting and carrying forward the Muslim League's demand for a separate Pakistan. Those living in Muslim-minority provinces were particularly afraid of losing their positions, perks and privileges in an independent India. Thus, they wholeheartedly supported Jinnah's idea of a separate homeland for the Muslims of the subcontinent. When the partition became inevitable, they enthusiastically migrated from different parts of India to the newly created Pakistan in hope of a better future. A majority of them settled in Sindh, especially Karachi, Hyderabad, Mirpur Khas and Sukkur. Soon, due to several reasons, including better education and their self-perception as *Ashrafis* – a sort of a 'higher caste' within Muslims, as they originated from present day

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<sup>136</sup> Sohail Sangi, 'Sindhi Nationalists Stand Divided', *Dawn*, 4 December 2014, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1148698> (Accessed on 19 June 2023).

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

Uttar Pradesh and Bihar – they came to dominate the politico-economic and bureaucratic space in the country. This resulted in growing resentment within the local population, who felt betrayed. Jinnah’s untimely demise and Liaqat Ali Khan’s assassination left the Mohajirs leaderless for a while. According to S. Akbar Zaidi, this heralded the beginning of the power shift between ethnic groups within Pakistan, which intensified with the first military takeover in 1958.<sup>138</sup>

Ayub Khan not only shifted the capital from Karachi to Islamabad but also went on to introduce significant changes in the bureaucracy, which directly hurt the Mohajirs. Their marginalisation continued when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, an ethnic Sindhi, came to power. Bhutto introduced quota system for recruitment in bureaucracy and adopted Sindhi along with Urdu as the official language of Sindh. This infuriated the Mohajirs further, as their recruitment in civil services dropped from 30.1 per cent in 1973 to 20.2 per cent in 1983.<sup>139</sup> It is against this background that Altaf Hussain’s All Pakistan Mohajir Students Organisation (APMSO) rose to prominence. The APMSO vice chairman put forward several political demands, including a separate province for Mohajirs and the abolition of the quota system. By March 1984, Altaf Hussain founded Mohajir Quami Movement (MQM) to address the concerns and discrimination faced by the Mohajir community in the country. In April 1985, Bushra Zaidi, a Mohajir student, was killed in a bus accident, which sparked large-scale protests and rioting in Karachi. The incident took on an ethnic hue due the death of a Mohajir student caused by a Pashto-speaking driver and was exacerbated by existing widespread allegations of uncivilised behaviour of Pashtun transport workers towards the Mohajirs.<sup>140</sup> However, as per Ghaus Ali Shah, the

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<sup>138</sup> S. Akbar Zaidi, ‘Sindhi vs Mohajir in Pakistan: Contradiction, Conflict, Compromise’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 26 (20), 1991, pp. 1295–1302.

<sup>139</sup> Farhan Hanif Siddiqui, *The Politics of Ethnicity in Pakistan: The Baloch, Sindhi and Mohajir Ethnic Movements*, Routledge, London, 2012, p. 99.

<sup>140</sup> Moonis Ahmar, ‘Ethnicity and State Power in Pakistan: The Karachi Crisis’, *Asian Survey*, 36 (10), 1996, 1031–1048.

then Chief Minister of Sindh province, the person who was caught and tried in sessions court for the incident was originally from 'Azad Kashmir'.<sup>141</sup> This was contradicted by the then President of Karachi Transport Itthad, Ishrad Hussain Shah Bukhari, who claimed that the crime was committed by a Punjabi-speaking driver.<sup>142</sup> Irrespective of the ethnicity of the driver, the incident led to the mobilisation of ethnic Mohajirs behind Altaf Hussain.

Altaf Hussain's charisma was such that, in August 1986, when MQM organised its first public gathering at Nishtar Park in Karachi, a large number of people turned up to listen to him, despite heavy rains. By 1988, MQM was the third largest political party in Pakistan and openly demanded to recognise Mohajirs as the fifth nationality of the country. MQM's growing influence in Karachi, Hyderabad and other areas of Sindh and its ability to quickly mobilise people in the streets was seen by those at the helm in Islamabad as an emerging threat to the national unity of Pakistan. The military considered MQM as a state within the state. In 1991, some MQM activists were behind the maltreatment of two army officers, including Major Kaleem, in Karachi.<sup>143</sup> This turned out to be a turning point, leading the military to launch an operation to curb the activities of the MQM.

Thus, on the pretext of targeting criminal networks in rural and urban Sindh, a military operation, codenamed Operation Clean Up, was launched in May 1992. It resulted in the extrajudicial killings of hundreds of MQM activists and innocent civilians. In October 1992, the Pakistan Army categorically accused the MQM of working towards the creation of a separate coastal state called 'Jinnahpur' or 'Urdudesh'. Due to the widespread crackdown, many top MQM leaders, including Altaf Hussain, fled the country and the rest of the party was tamed through a combination of coercion and pacification.

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<sup>141</sup> Noman Ahmed and Saba Imtiaz, 'Bushra Zaidi, the Woman Who Changed Karachi Forever, By Dying', *The Express Tribune*, 7 March 2012.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Moonis Ahmar, note no. 140.

The two-pronged strategy of brutal suppression and occasional co-option worked well in case of Sindhi and Mohajir nationalist aspirations. At present, there is hardly any strong nationalist movement against the Pakistani state apparatus, except in Balochistan. A weak undercurrent, nevertheless, could still be found among tiny sections of Mohajir and Sindhi communities. The Pashtun situation is a bit different.

### **The Baloch Resistance**

As far as the Baloch ethno-national movement is concerned, it is not only active but also creating problems for the security establishment in the country. The Baloch have a pre-partition history of asserting their ethno-nationalist aspirations. One can trace their origins way back to the late 1920s when the Iranian ruler, Reza Shah Pahlavi, attempted to incorporate the area into Iran in 1928. Due to the fragmented nature of the Baloch society, they could not come together in an organized manner to launch a national movement during the British rule in the Indian subcontinent. However, sporadic resistance to colonial subjugation continued.<sup>144</sup> When the British government tried to assuage the anti-colonial leadership in India by introducing the Government of India Act of 1935, the Khan of Kalat strongly objected to the move as it treated the Khanate as any other princely state of India. With the passage of time, as the anti-colonial movement in India gathered momentum, the demand for an independent Balochistan also grew louder.

The Khan of Kalat, through his various legal advisors, including Muhammad Ali Jinnah, argued with the British that, like Nepal, Kalat had its treaty relations with Whitehall (London) and therefore, it cannot be clubbed with other princely states. He categorically argued that the Government of India Act 1935 was an infringement on the treaties of 1854 and 1876 between Kalat and the British Government. Article II of the 1854 treaty stated: "There shall be perpetual friendship between the British Government and Meer Nusseer Khan, Chief of Khelat, his

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<sup>144</sup> Adeel Khan, *Politics of Identity: Ethnic Nationalism and the State in Pakistan*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2005, p. 114.

heirs and successors'.<sup>145</sup> Similarly, Article III of the 1876 treaty stated: 'While on his part, Meer Khodadad Khan, Khan of Khelat, binds himself, his heirs, successors, and Sirdars to observe faithfully the provisions of the Article 3 of the Treaty of 1854, the British Government on its part engages to respect the independence of Khelat'.<sup>146</sup>

The legality of this could not be questioned by anyone, including the British. However, some officials in the British circles later claimed that it was a misreading of the treaties by the Khan of Kalat. As the anti-colonial movement reached at its peak in the 1940s, the question of Kalat was given scant attention. The Baloch aspirations to form an independent state after the lapse of British paramountcy was not taken seriously at all, either by the outgoing imperial administration or the new government of Pakistan. In another setback to the Baloch nationalists, two feudatories of Kalat – Kharan and Las Bela – over whom Khan's suzerain control was restored after the lapse of British paramountcy, acceded to Pakistan, in clear violation of their loyalty to Kalat. Although, legally, the feudatories had no right to sign the instrument of accession, such an act of defiance deprived the Khanate half of its territory and access to the sea. A disgruntled Khan was still arguing out his case, when a broadcast on 27 March 1948 in All India Radio news indicated that the Khan had been in touch with India and mulling the idea of accession.<sup>147</sup> The broadcast stated '... two months ago, the Kalat Government had applied to the Government of India for merger; but the Indian Government rejected their request on the ground of its geographical position'.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Article II of Treaty between Kalat and British Government signed at Mastung on 14 May 1854.

<sup>146</sup> Article III of the 1876 Treaty between Kalat and British government signed in Jacobabad on 8 December 1876.

<sup>147</sup> Ashish Shukla, 'The Trajectory of Baloch Resistance in Pakistan', *Journal of Asian Politics and Society*, 2 (1), 2018, pp. 135–163.

The Khan termed it as mischievous Indian propaganda to widen the gulf of hatred between Balochistan and Pakistan. Following this, Pakistan sent a huge army contingent to encircle the Khan's palace, leaving him no choice but to sign the instrument of accession. It is under these circumstances that the Khan, without obtaining the formal sanction from the Baloch people, signed the merger documents on 30 March 1948, in his own capacity as the Khan-e-Azam.<sup>149</sup> This did not go down well with Baloch nationalists, resulting in the first wave of national uprising in Balochistan.

Mir Ahmed Yar Khan, then the Khan of Kalat, waxed eloquent about his love for Pakistan in his autobiography published in 1975. On the invitation of Jinnah, he travelled to Karachi, the erstwhile capital of Pakistan, in October 1947. During the meeting, Jinnah advised the merger of Kalat into Pakistan, to which the Khan said, 'I have great respect for your advice ... and it is my considered opinion that Kalat's merger is necessary in order to make Pakistan stronger'.<sup>150</sup> However, he also informed him that, as per the prevalent tribal convention, no decision can be binding unless the Baloch are duly consulted and taken into confidence. Upon his return from Karachi, the Khan summoned Dar-ul-Awam and Dar-ul-Umra (the lower and upper houses of parliament) and proposed the merger of Kalat with Pakistan. On 14 December 1947, during the discussions in Dar-ul-Awam, Ghous Bux Bizenjo delivered the famous speech, in which he stated:

We are ready for friendship with honour not in indignity. We are not ready to merge within the frontiers of Pakistan. We have a distinct culture like Afghanistan and Iran, and if the mere fact that we are Muslims require us to amalgamate with Pakistan,

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<sup>148</sup> Mir Ahmed Yar Khan Baluch, *Inside Baluchistan: A Political Autobiography of His Highness Baiglar Baigi: Khan-e-Azam-XIII*, Royal Book Company, Karachi, 1975, p. 159.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

then Afghanistan and Iran should also be amalgamated with Pakistan. They say that we Baluch cannot defend ourselves in the atomic age. Well, are Afghanistan, Iran and even Pakistan capable of defending themselves against the super powers? If we cannot defend ourselves, a lot of others cannot do so either. We are asked to sign the death warrant of one hand a half crore Baluch of Asia. We cannot be guilty of such a major crime.<sup>151</sup>

At the end of the discussions, both the Houses unanimously rejected the proposal. The fact remains that he had to sign the instrument of accession under duress. His son, Mir Suleman Dawood Jan, the present Khan of Kalat, before fleeing to London in 2006, had convened and steered a grand assembly of Baloch leaders to assert Baloch right to self-determination and independence. The uprising, led by Prince Abdul Karim, the brother of the Khan of Kalat, Mir Ahmed Yar Khan, continued till 1950, when he was deceived with an offer of negotiation and arrested by Pakistan Army.

The second wave of unrest started in 1955, when Pakistan introduced the One Unit Plan to unify Punjab, Sindh, erstwhile NWFP and Balochistan. The move was aimed to offset the numerical majority of Bengalis in East Pakistan. However, it resulted in the launch of the second wave of uprising in Balochistan. By now, Prince Abdul Karim had completed his prison term and launched the movement for the unified province of Balochistan. The widespread demonstrations continued for over three years. In order to deal with the situation, the Pakistan Army detained Khan in his palace on 6 October 1958, while other prominent Baloch leaders were also detained in other towns. These illegal detentions sparked massive violence in the region. The Baloch now united behind the 90-year-old rebel leader, Nawab Nauroz Khan. The Pakistan Army betrayed the rebels again by asking them to come down from the mountains for negotiations but later arrested Nauroz Khan and his supporters. This weakened the resistance against the Pakistan Army and led to the end of the second wave. In July

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<sup>151</sup> B.M. Kutty (ed.), *In Search of Solutions: An Autobiography of Mir Ghaus Baksh Bizzenjo*, Pakistan Study Centre, Karachi, 2011, pp. 37–38.

1960, Nauroz Khan's son, along with five other Baloch activists, was hanged, while Nauroz Khan himself died in prison in 1964.

Following the ruthless suppression of Baloch resistance in 1959, the Pakistan Army advanced its footprint across Balochistan, initiating the construction of new garrisons. This provoked strong opposition from Baloch activists, catalysing a renewed guerrilla movement. By 1963, the *Parari* fighters had ignited the third wave of resistance, establishing over 20 fortified base camps spread across 45,000 square miles of rugged terrain. For six years, the region witnessed a grinding see-saw of insurgent defiance and military retaliation, culminating in a ceasefire in 1969. General Yahya Khan's subsequent dissolution of the One Unit Plan finally restored Balochistan's provincial status and marked the end of the third wave of resistance. However, the Baloch were not satisfied with the new demarcation of Balochistan because it included three Pashtun-majority districts (Loralai, Zhob and Pishin) while excluding Jacobabad and Dera Ghazi Khan, where the Baloch were in a majority.<sup>152</sup>

The fourth wave erupted in 1973, triggered by Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's dismissal of the elected provincial government and the imposition of presidential rule. Bhutto was extremely unhappy with his party's performance in Balochistan and NWFP in the 1970 elections. PPP could not open its account in Balochistan and won only one seat in NWFP. Bhutto soon acquired authoritarian tendencies as there was no real opposition to check his power. As he was looking for some opportunities to create space for his party in the tribal borderlands, the federal government seized a large cache of weapons from the Iraqi Embassy in Islamabad. These weapons were intended to incite unrest in the Iranian province of Sistan-Balochistan. However, Bhutto used it as a pretext to launch a crackdown in Balochistan and NWFP. He went on to dismiss the governors of the two provinces and imposed presidential rule in Balochistan by abolishing the cabinet. The U.S.

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<sup>152</sup> International Crisis Group, *Pakistan: The Worsening Conflict in Balochistan*, ICG Asia Report No. 119, 14 September 2006.

Embassy in Pakistan sent a telegram to the Department of State, in which it *inter alia* stated that ‘Bhutto has seized opportunity presented by Iraqi Embassy arms discovery to topple opposition governments in Baluchistan and frontier through constitutional means’.<sup>153</sup> This abolition of the cabinet and imposition of governor rule sparked the fourth wave of resistance. The intensity of the uprising this time compelled the Pakistan Army to deploy U.S.-supplied Chinook and Iranian Huey Cobra helicopters – a stark indicator of the escalating conflict. The infamous Operation Chamalang was launched, which was a brutal campaign that battered the Baloch until they were depleted of ammunition and personnel. Following Bhutto’s unceremonious ouster by the same military apparatus he had empowered, the imprisoned Baloch nationalists were released, marking the end of this turbulent phase.

After a lull spanning nearly three decades, Baloch resistance reignited, this time in response to Pakistan’s ambitious developmental incursions into strategically vital and resource-rich regions like Dera Bugti, Kohlu and Gwadar. While framed as infrastructure advancement, these projects masked deeper anxieties among Baloch nationalists, who feared the erosion of indigenous identity and the spectre of demographic transformation. The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) and Baloch Liberation Front (BLF) emerged as vanguards of this renewed struggle, targeting non-Baloch settlers and foreign actors operating on Baloch soil. Flashpoints, such as the alleged rape of Dr. Shazia Khalid by a Pakistan Army officer, galvanized public outrage and escalated hostilities. General Pervez Musharraf responded with uncompromising force, publicly threatening prominent nationalist leaders – Akbar Bugti, Khair Bux Marri, and Ataullah Mengal – whom he deemed as obstacles to Islamabad’s writ in Balochistan.

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<sup>153</sup> Department of State, ‘108. Telegram 1389 From the Embassy in Pakistan to the Department of State’, 16 February 1973, available at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve08/d108> (Accessed on 13 May 2025.)

The killing of Akbar Bugti in August 2006 during a military operation marked a pivotal moment. It unleashed a fierce wave of resistance, targeting the Pakistani state and its security establishment with renewed intensity. This fifth phase of rebellion diverges sharply from its predecessors – it was not led by Sardars but propelled by the educated middle class. These young Baloch, deeply rooted in their cultural legacy and armed with historical consciousness, reject the collaborative ventures of Pakistan and China that, in their view, exploit Balochistan's mineral wealth and marginalize its people.

The resistance in Balochistan has taken new forms – suicide attacks have emerged as a tactical deterrent against what indigenous Baloch claim to be foreign encroachment. Notably, a growing number of women have also joined the ranks of suicide bombers, highlighting a dramatic shift in resistance mobilisation. A watershed event occurred in April 2022, when Shari Baloch, a mother of two, targeted Chinese educators at the Confucius Institute in Karachi University. The BLA, claiming responsibility, described the strike as a warning against 'Chinese economic, cultural and political expansionism',<sup>154</sup> asserting that any foreign footprint in Balochistan would be met with unwavering opposition.

On the 18th death anniversary of Nawab Akbar Bugti in August 2024, the BLA launched Operation Herof, a significant offensive targeting Pakistan's military apparatus. According to BLA's claims, the assault resulted in the deaths of over 130 personnel.<sup>155</sup> A press release noted: 'In Operation Herof, eight hundred highly trained elite fighters from BLA's Fatah Squad and Special and Tactical Operations Squad (STOS) participated, along with seven fidayeen (suicide attackers) from the

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<sup>154</sup> Kiyya Baloch and Akbar Notezai, 'Pakistan: Woman Suicide Bomber Change in Baloch Rebels' Strategy?' *Al Jazeera*, 28 April 2022, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/28/pakistan-woman-suicide-bomber-change-in-baloch-rebels-strategy> (Accessed on 27 June 2024).

<sup>155</sup> BLA, 'Operation Herof was the First Phase of Reclaiming Control over Baloch Land - BLA', Press Release, Baloch Liberation Army, 26 August 2024.

Majeed Brigade'.<sup>156</sup> The group also released photographs of suicide bombers, Mahal Baloch (female) and Rizwan Baloch, both hailing from Gwadar – symbolically underscoring Gwadar's role at the heart of contested development and resistance.<sup>157</sup>

Militant activity continued with intensifying precision in 2025. On the intervening night of 25–26 January, rebels attacked a security checkpoint in Kech district, reportedly killing at least 10 Pakistani soldiers. Within a week, on 1 February, coordinated strikes targeted Frontier Corps headquarters in Noshki and Punjgur districts, resulting in the deaths of seven soldiers, including a major. The Majeed Brigade later claimed responsibility for these attacks.<sup>158</sup> On 11 March, BLA hijacked Jaffar Express, which connects Quetta, Lahore, Peshawar and Islamabad via Sindh and serves as a vital artery for people and a key transport route for off-duty security personnel to travel to their homes and posting stations.<sup>159</sup> Through a series of press releases, BLA claimed that since Pakistan did not accept its demand of releasing Baloch political prisoners, disappeared persons and national resistance activists, it executed 214 personnel.<sup>160</sup> In a joint press conference of DG ISPR and Chief Minister of Balochistan, the Pakistan Army accepted the loss of 26 people, including 18 armed forces personnel.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Saleem Shahid, 'Balochistan Plunges Deeper into Militancy Vortex', *Dawn*, 27 August 2024, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1855006> (Accessed on 29 August 2024).

<sup>158</sup> Kamran Yousaf, 'Pakistan's War on Terror-II', *The Express Tribune*, 7 February 2025, available at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2342304/pakistans-war-on-terror-ii> (Accessed on 8 February 2025).

<sup>159</sup> Ashish Shukla, 'The Jaffar Express Hijack and Shrinking State Writ in Balochistan', MP-IDSAs Comment, 19 March 2025, available at <https://idsa.in/publisher/comments/the-jaffar-express-hijack-and-shrinking-state-writ-in-balochistan> (Accessed on 19 March 2025).

<sup>160</sup> Press Releases issued by BLA on 11 March, 12 March, 13 March and 14 March 2025.

<sup>161</sup> ISPR Official, 'DG ISPR Press Conference', YouTube, 14 March 2025, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NRD-paeshFU> (Accessed on 17 March 2025).

This sequence of attacks illustrates that the fifth wave of Baloch movement – initiated after Akbar Bugti’s 2006 killing – has neither faded nor fragmented. Instead, it has evolved, increasingly driven by educated, younger Baloch professionals who frame their resistance in terms of political self-determination and sovereign control over Balochistan’s natural wealth. Their rejection of state-led narratives and infrastructure projects, especially those linked to China–Pakistan cooperation under CPEC, reflects a deeper ideological rupture. Far from dissipating, the insurgency appears to be gaining structural cohesion, regional outreach and symbolic resonance.

## THE PASHTUN UNEASE

Pashtuns from Pakistan’s northwestern regions bordering Afghanistan have historically been inherently secular, with their tribal identity assuming more prominence than their religious affiliation. It is important to note that the All India Muslim League, even at its zenith, could not convince the Pashtuns to side with its demand for a separate state. The Pashtuns not only refused to buy Jinnah’s argument but also opposed the partition of India on religious grounds and supported the anti-colonial movement of Congress. The erstwhile NWFP, now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), was the only Muslim-majority province in pre-partition India which did not align with Jinnah’s Muslim League. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the prominent Pashtun leader known as Frontier Gandhi, had ruled out joining Pakistan. He even toyed with the idea of an independent state and therefore boycotted the referendum held to decide the fate of the province. In the absence of his consent, very limited number of the electorate participated in the referendum, which resulted in a pro-Pakistan vote with a narrow margin.<sup>162</sup>

On August 22, 1947, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan’s democratically elected government was dismissed by Governor Sir George Cunningham on the advice of Jinnah. At the time of partition, a significant number of Pashtuns were serving in the military. All of them were retained by

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<sup>162</sup> Robert Boggs, ‘Pakistan’s Pashtun Challenge: Moving from Confrontation to Integration’, *Strategic Analysis*, 36(2), 206–216.

what came to be known as Pakistan Army. The rest of the Pashtun political leadership was also given some space in the province under the broader political framework called Pakistan. However, the Punjabi-dominated state later did not treat them fairly. Like Bengalis and Baloch, they too faced numerous difficulties. The situation changed drastically during Gen. Zia-ul-Haq's regime, when Pakistan agreed to become the U.S.'s proxy in the so-called Holy War in Afghanistan. The province became the launchpad for the Mujahedeen, who crossed over to Afghanistan to fight the Soviet forces. Ever since then, the Pashtun-dominated province did not return to normalcy, with the situation remaining precarious throughout the U.S.-led War on Terror.

Under Gen. Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan became notorious for, to borrow the adage, 'running with the hare and hunting with the hounds'. The Punjabi-dominated state of Pakistan may have gained in terms of economic and military aid, however, the Pashtun community experienced great suffering. Their suffering did not come to an end with the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan. The ordinary Pashtuns were now caught between a resurgent Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the security establishment. In order to deal with various indigenous terror outfits, the security establishment launched several military operations in the region, including the notable Operation Zarb-e-Azb and Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad.

Pashtuns from Pakistan's northwestern frontier, particularly those bordering Afghanistan, have historically embraced secular tribalism over religious orthodoxy. Their identity was deeply rooted in tribal affiliations, cultural autonomy and the anti-colonial sentiment and thus could not be persuaded by the Muslim League to support its idea of a separate Muslim homeland. Not only did the Pashtuns reject Jinnah's communal argument, they vocally opposed India's partition on religious grounds and stood behind the Indian National Congress's secular resistance.

The NWFP – now renamed as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) – was the only Muslim-majority region that did not align with Jinnah's Muslim League before partition. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, known as Frontier Gandhi, ruled out joining Pakistan and even entertained the idea of Pashtunistan, an independent Pashtun state. His boycott of the 1947 referendum undermined its legitimacy, resulting in minimal voter turnout

and a narrow pro-Pakistan outcome.<sup>163</sup> On August 22, 1947, Khan Abdul Jabbar Khan's democratically elected government was dismissed by Governor Sir George Cunningham, acting on Jinnah's advice. While many Pashtuns were absorbed into the Pakistan Army after partition, the political leadership was merely accommodated within a system increasingly dominated by the Punjabi elite. Over time, they faced systematic marginalisation, echoing the experiences of Bengalis and Baloch.

A tectonic shift occurred under General Zia-ul-Haq's regime, when Pakistan became the U.S.'s proxy in the so-called 'holy war' against Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa became a launchpad for Mujahideen incursions across the border, militarizing the province and displacing civilian structures. This instability continued during the U.S.-led War on Terror, exacerbated under General Pervez Musharraf, whose dual strategy of 'running with the hare, and hunting with the hounds' drew sharp criticism. While Pakistan gained strategic depth and foreign aid, the Pashtuns bore the brunt of perpetual conflict. Even after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, their suffering persisted. Caught between a resurgent Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Pakistani security establishment, ordinary Pashtuns faced displacement, surveillance and violence. In response to growing militancy, military operations such as Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014), Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017) and Azm-e-Istehkam (2024) were launched across KP, turning civilian spaces into contested battlegrounds.

The military operations, which commenced in 2007, resulted in large-scale forced movement of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). By mid-2011, out of a total 2.7 million, almost one million people were registered as IDPs from erstwhile Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) alone.<sup>164</sup> These numbers were believed to be less than the actual displacement, as many people lived with their hosts in other parts of the country and might not have registered themselves as IDPs. Many

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Saira Bano Orakzai, 'The War Against Terror and the Issue of Internally Displaced People in Pakistan in the Post 9/11 Period', *Journal of Internal Displacement*, 2(1), 2012, pp. 67–78.

of these IDPs still seek resettlement in their own lands. The simmering dissatisfaction and anger among the Pashtuns were also exacerbated by the concerted efforts of the politico-security establishment to disregard the traditional *Maliki* system by deploying federal civil servants in the tribal belt. Although FATA has been merged with the settled areas of KP, the people are still nostalgic about the past and have trouble adapting themselves to the new reality. There are those who still believe that, at some time in the future, they would be able to separate themselves from the settled areas of KP. Besides, during the military operations, a significant number of village elders were also killed either by indigenous terror outfits or the security forces. These grievances, most of them genuine by any measure, have in some way contributed to the emergence of the movement for the protection of the Pashtun people in the sensitive borderland of Pakistan.

Qamar Jafri identifies four distinct layers of suffering inflicted upon the Pashtuns of KP: prolonged exposure to armed conflict, radicalization stemming from the influx of foreign terrorist elements, devastation, especially in erstwhile FATA, and casualties caused by the Pakistan Army's counterterrorism operations, and the cyclical imposition of socio-political restrictions by security elites<sup>165</sup> The cumulative toll of these conditions has been catastrophic for ordinary Pashtuns, particularly the youth. From denial of basic human rights to widespread destruction of property, internal displacement and the haunting spectre of enforced disappearances, the tribal belt has borne the cost of decades of militarized governance. Pashtun students have historically been facing discrimination in various academic institutions, especially in Punjab. On 22 January 2018, a brutal clash took place between students at Punjab University's Quad-e-Azam campus, following which the university administration expelled a number of students. The Pashtun students staged a protest and demanded fair treatment in the campus, to stop branding them anti-Pakistan and to roll back their expulsions. Later,

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<sup>165</sup> Qamar Jafri, *The Pashtun Protection Movement (PTM) in Pakistan*, ICNC Special Report, 8 (September), 2021, Washington, DC.

the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan urged in a social media post to take immediate measures to address these valid and serious concerns.<sup>166</sup> The situation in other premier institutions is no different.

In response to these structural injustices, a grassroots movement emerged, initially centred around protecting youth from the Mehsud tribe. Under the leadership of Manzoor Pashteen, the Mehsud Tahafuz Movement (MTM) focused on demining Waziristan, halting extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances, ending harassment at security checkpoints and demanding compensation for property damages. A major inflection point came in January 2018 with the extrajudicial killing of Naqeebullah Mehsud, an aspiring model, in Karachi. The MTM mobilized mass protests that led to an official inquiry holding Rao Anwar, a senior police officer, responsible for the killing.<sup>167</sup> As the movement's resonance deepened across tribal regions, the MTM was rebranded as the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), marking a shift from localized grievance to national resistance.

The PTM's six-point charter demands structural accountability:

- Establishing a truth and reconciliation commission for investigating human rights abuses
- Ending enforced disappearances
- Ensuring justice for victims of forced disappearances
- Demining tribal territories
- Halting extrajudicial killings
- Ending humiliations at military and security checkpoints

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<sup>166</sup> Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, <https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/hrcp-alarmed-over-expulsion-of-pashtun-and-baloch-students-by-punjab-university-administration/> (Accessed on 12 March 2020).

<sup>167</sup> Faraz Khan, 'Rao Anwar Staged Fake Encounter: Inquiry', *The Express Tribune*, 28 January 2018, available at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1620232/coordinated-fake-encounter-naqeeb-rao-anwar-police-team-inquiry-report> (Accessed on 3 March 2025).

At its core, the PTM reclaims agency for a marginalized population long treated as expendable. It combines grassroots mobilization with constitutional demands, offering a civil rights framework amid a heavily securitised landscape. The movement's evolution from tribal advocacy to national dissent reflects a rising consciousness among the Pashtun youth – one that interrogates not just state violence but the very structure of Pakistan's internal security regime. Ever since, the PTM has been pushing for its demands in a non-violent way. They draw their inspiration for a non-violent struggle from the legendary Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan's Khudai Khidmatgar [Servants of God] and the Lal Kurti Andolan [Red Shirt Movement]. At its peak in the 1930s, there were about 100,000 Pashtun waging their non-violent resistance against the British colonial government. The security establishment in Pakistan has historically tried to deal with non-violent movements through the use of brutal force. Despite a blowback of this strategy and especially losing half of its territory and population in 1971, Pakistan's politico-security elites have refused to learn a lesson. Even today, every single non-violent mobilization in Pakistan is seen as a threat to the state apparatus in Pakistan. The country's law enforcement agencies and security institutions have not been trained or equipped to deal with such social movements and mobilizations in a peaceful manner.

When confronted with authentic grassroots mobilisation, the Pakistani security establishment often defaults to its familiar playbook: 'Blame Thy Neighbour'. Social movements that challenge the dominant power structures are routinely portrayed as foreign conspiracies. In a bid to delegitimise the PTM, the Pakistan Army resorted to the same tactic – accusing it of acting as an agent of India and Afghanistan. On 29 April 2019, DG-ISPR Maj. Gen. Asif Ghafoor declared, 'Those playing in others' hands, their time is up', alleging that PTM had received foreign funding from hostile sources and that 'We have the details, how much collected and from where it came'.<sup>168</sup> Despite this public vilification, PTM persisted, continuing to raise concerns over enforced disappearances, military excesses and systemic ethnic marginalization.

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<sup>168</sup> Baqir Sajjad Syed and Syed Irfan Raza, 'Foreign Spy Agencies Fund PTM, Says Army', *Dawn*, 30 April 2019, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1479321> (Accessed on 1 May 2019).

When neither persuasion nor intimidation proved effective, the politico-security elite turned to punitive measures. On 27 January 2020, the PTM leader Manzoor Pashteen was arrested on sedition charges. His alleged crime, as stated in the First Information Report (FIR), was a speech on 18 January questioning the Pakistani constitution and highlighting Punjabi hegemony that had disempowered Pashtuns.<sup>169</sup> The crackdown escalated on 6 December 2020, when Pashteen – along with prominent figures Ali Wazir, Mohsin Dawar, Muhammad Shafi and Hidayatullah Pashteen – was charged again for inciting rebellion during a rally in Safoora Goth.<sup>170</sup> Ultimately, on 6 October 2024, the Pakistani Interior Ministry formally banned PTM, citing its activities as ‘prejudicial to peace and security of the country’.<sup>171</sup> The proscription represents the culmination of a broader pattern: silencing dissent not through dialogue or reform but through allegations, arrests and legal coercion.

Human rights organizations and civil society bodies decried the government’s decision to impose a ban on the PTM. Amnesty International stated that PTM was a grassroots movement that advocated for human rights in a peaceful manner. It termed the ban as part of a systematic and relentless clampdown on peaceful protests and assemblies by dissenting groups. Babu Ram Pant, Amnesty International’s Deputy Regional Director for South Asia, categorically

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<sup>169</sup> Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shah Meer Baloch, ‘Civil Rights Activist Arrested in Pakistan on Sedition Charges’, *The Guardian*, 27 January 2020, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/27/civil-rights-activist-manzoor-ahmad-pashteen-arrested-in-pakistan-on-sedition-charges> (Accessed on 30 January 2020).

<sup>170</sup> ‘Sedition Case: Mohsin Dawar, Manzoor Pashteen Among Others Declared Proclaimed Offenders By ATC’, *The Friday Times*, 14 October 2021, available at <https://thefridaytimes.com/14-Oct-2021/sedition-case-mohsin-dawar-manzoor-pashteen-among-others-declared-proclaimed-offenders-by-atc> (Accessed on 14 November 2023).

<sup>171</sup> ‘Pakistan Bans Prominent Pashtun Rights Group Citing Security Concerns’, *Al Jazeera*, 7 October 2024, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/7/pakistan-bans-prominent-pashtun-rights-group-citing-security-concerns> (Accessed on 24 November 2024).

asked Pakistan for course correction and to put an end to the criminalisation of peaceful protests and assemblies.<sup>172</sup>

The PTM held a three-day long Jirga in Jamrud on 11–13 October 2024 during which the delegates discussed several issues, including displacement, enforced disappearances, harassment at check posts and extrajudicial killings of Pashtuns. The 22-point resolution *inter alia* demanded the lifting of ban on the PTM and gave a two-month's ultimatum to militant groups and Pakistan military to leave the Pashtun land, failing which the PTM would take actions to evict the forces of war and insecurity.<sup>173</sup> Following Pakistan's refusal to revoke the ban, the movement found renewed expression through the Pashtun National Jirga – an indigenous platform for articulating long-standing grievances and civil rights demands. Undeterred by state suppression, the PTM continues to press for transparency, justice and ethnic dignity.

The Pashtun diaspora has emerged as a powerful moral and political force, amplifying these demands on global platforms. From Washington to Berlin, its voice grows louder – challenging Pakistan's internal policies through transnational protest. On 13 April 2025, a coordinated demonstration took place in the Netherlands, demanding humane treatment of Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan and the immediate release of political prisoners and human rights defenders, including Ali Wazir, Malak Naseer and Mahrang Baloch. This evolving activism represents a potent shift – from localized dissent to global advocacy. It underscores the resilience of the Pashtun narrative in the face of systemic silencing and illustrates how diaspora communities are redefining the contours of resistance, human rights discourse and collective memory.

The ethnic fault lines in Balochistan and KP appear to be exacerbating. In case of Balochistan, the crack has widened beyond repair due to the heavy-handed policies of the security establishment. With the advent of China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and other projects

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<sup>172</sup> Amnesty International, 'Pakistan: Authorities Must Immediately Revoke Ban on Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement', 8 October 2024.

<sup>173</sup> Arif Hayat, 'PTM Jirga Demands Withdrawal of Militants from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa', *Dawn*, 14 October 2024.

aimed to extract natural resources without passing on the due benefits to the people, feelings of suffocation and marginalisation experienced by the Baloch has reached an all-time high. They are increasingly losing hopes of a normal and peaceful life within a unified Pakistan. In Pashtun-dominated KP, the situation is a bit different. The disgruntlement with both provincial and federal government is very much present. While the movement for Pashtun rights and liberties has largely been peaceful and there is no sign of it getting violent in near future, that does not mean that Pakistan can take the situation for granted forever. If the politico-security elites remain indifferent to the genuine grievances of Pashtuns, the nation may witness an insurgency-like situation in the strategically important province.

## THE ECONOMIC FAULT LINE

In its early years, Pakistan's economy was characterised by relative stability, strong growth and low inflation. The Ayub era was particularly known to be a model of development and aid effectiveness. The Second Five-Year plan was widely regarded by many as the best produced in Pakistan and the developing world. The country was one among the few developing nations that had achieved an average growth rate of over five per cent in the first four decades of its emergence as an independent state. However, this growth trajectory was primarily powered by international aid and external financing. Instead of focusing on equitable growth and development by investing in human capital and empowering them to take lead in various economic activities in the country, Pakistan ended up creating elite monopoly in the entire economic system. This was exposed by none other than the Chief Economist of the Planning Commission. In 1968, Dr. Mahbub-ul-Haq jolted everyone with his revelations that only 22 families in Pakistan controlled 66 per cent of manufacturing and 87 per cent of banking and insurance business in the country.<sup>174</sup> Besides, the military, through its various foundations, emerged as the biggest business conglomerate in the country.

Ayesha Siddiqi, in her in-depth study of the military's business activities in Pakistan, emphasises that military capital is used for personal benefit of the military fraternity, especially the officer cadre, but is neither recorded nor part of the defence budget.<sup>175</sup> She also argues that the military's internal economy is fairly decentralised and operates at multiple

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<sup>174</sup> 'Fathoming Wealth of the Rich', *Dawn*, 26 December 2011, <https://www.dawn.com/news/683301/fathoming-wealth-of-the-rich> (Accessed on 27 February 2024).

<sup>175</sup> Ayesha Siddiqi, *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*, Pluto Press, London, 2007, p. 1.

levels and in multiple segments.<sup>176</sup> The Canadian academic T.V. Paul suggests that the military has deeply entrenched itself in various sectors<sup>177</sup> including education, healthcare, disaster relief, infrastructure etc., and runs a vast array of institutions in the country, such as military schools and colleges, teachers training institutes, Army Education Press, the National Institute of Modern Language, the National University of Science and Technology, Cadet Colleges and so on. All this had become possible due to the high walls of protection, subsidies and government patronage<sup>178</sup> offered to both military-affiliated businesses and powerful corporates.

Things began to change in the early 1990s and the country's fortunes slipped in terms of growth, exports, revenues and developmental spending, which later culminated into a deep morass of domestic and external indebtedness.<sup>179</sup> However, the politico-security elites of the country did not take necessary measures to address the fundamental anomalies. The initial signs of macroeconomic volatility emerged during the first tenure of the Benazir Bhutto government, and the country turned towards IMF for a major aid programme in December 1988. The government negotiated and finalised a Stand by Arrangement (SBA) and a Structural Adjustment Facility (SAF) to deal with an impending economic crisis. Before the Benazir Bhutto government, Pakistan had turned to the IMF nine times, starting with the Ayub Khan government that negotiated the first SBA.<sup>180</sup> Of these, only two were Extended Fund Facility (EFF) and the rest were SBAs needed for short-term financial assistance.<sup>181</sup>

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., pp. 112–114.

<sup>177</sup> Paul, T.V. (2014), *The Warrior State: Pakistan in the Contemporary World*, New York: Oxford University Press, p.12.

<sup>178</sup> Meekal Ahmed, 'An Economic Crisis State?', in Maleeha Lodhi (ed.), *Pakistan: Beyond the 'Crisis State'*, Hurst & Co., London, 2011.

<sup>179</sup> Ishrat Husain, 'The Economy of Pakistan: Past, Present and Future', in Robert M. Hathaway and Wilson Lee (eds.) *Islamization and the Pakistani Economy*, Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, Washington D.C, 2004.

<sup>180</sup> 'Pakistan: History of Lending Commitment as of June 30, 2025', International Monetary Fund, 30 June 2025.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

The Lahore School of Economics, in 2013, undertook an in-depth study of the Pakistani economy and presented eight key findings which, *inter alia*, underlined that the economic problems were not just cyclical in nature but structural. The study emphasised that Pakistan's economy had been badly mismanaged over a long period of time and, to move it forward, the country required deep economic reforms to remove structural imbalances, increase efficiency and competitiveness and spur entrepreneurship and innovation.<sup>182</sup> However, those at the helm of affairs in Islamabad refused to learn any lessons and made no serious attempt to introduce meaningful reform to address the structural issues in the economy. As a result, the economy has long been tethered to external assistance and trapped in a cycle of aid dependency and fiscal volatility.

**Fiscal Deficit and Public Debt (Table 1)**

<b>Financial Year</b>	<b>Fiscal Deficit (% of GDP)</b>	<b>Total Public Debt (% of GDP)</b>
2020	8.1	76.6
2021	6.1	71.4
2022	7.9	73.9
2023	7.8	75.2
2024	6.9	67.8

**Source:** Compiled from *Pakistan Economic Survey 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23, 2023-24, 2024-25*.

Atif Mian, the Pakistani-American economist who briefly served in Pakistan's Economic Advisory Council (EAC) during the Imran Khan

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<sup>182</sup> Rashid Amjad and Shahid Javed Burki, 'Overview', in Rashid Amjad and Shahid Javed Burki (eds), *Pakistan: Moving the Economy Forward*, Lahore School of Economics, Lahore, 2013.

government, opined that Pakistan approaches IMF after every election to ‘plug the hole and kick the can down the road down for another five years until the next near-death experience’.<sup>183</sup> This has been happening due to the collusion between the politico-security elites, landlords and big businessmen who have an eye on national wealth without caring much about the well-being of the people at large. A recent IMF assessment suggests that corruption is behind the economic crisis driven by ‘state capture’, where policies are made to benefit a narrow circle of political and business elites.<sup>184</sup> Earlier, a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report had underlined that the economic privileges granted to elite groups – including politicians and military – amount to roughly six per cent of the country’s economy.<sup>185</sup> The Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), believed to be the brainchild of Gen. Asim Munir, failed to meet its objectives in less than two years after its creation. In late November 2025, during a two-day economic dialogue, the SIFC National Coordinator, Lt. Gen. Sarfraz Ahmed, acknowledged the concerns raised by business leaders. He conceded that the high corporate taxes were discouraging foreign direct investment (FDI).<sup>186</sup>

Recent estimates suggest that Pakistan is stuck in an unending debt trap due to exponential growth of debt amid constant high fiscal deficit. In 2020, the consolidated fiscal deficit stood at 8.1 per cent of GDP, which reduced to 6.1 per cent in 2021. However, it steeply rose in 2022 and reached 7.9 per cent. A slight reduction was reported in 2023, when the fiscal deficit came down to 7.8 per cent, which further decreased to 6.9 per cent in 2024. Similarly, in 2020, the total public debt was reported to be 76.6 per cent of GDP, which reduced to 71.4

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<sup>183</sup> Atif R. Mian, ‘Fixing Pakistan’s Financial Woes’, *Dawn*, 17 August 2018.

<sup>184</sup> Abid Hussain, “‘Elite Capture’: How Pakistan is Losing 6 Percent of its GDP to Corruption”, *Al Jazeera*, 25 November 2025.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> Mubarak Zeb Khan, ‘SIFC Feels High Taxes Discourage Investments’, *Dawn*, 28 November 2025.

per cent in 2021. It rose to 79.3 per cent in 2022 and 75.2 per cent in 2023, before coming down to 67.8 per cent in 2024, all thanks to the new IMF programme. The recurrent budgetary shortfalls have resulted in a rapid accumulation of public debt. A high fiscal deficit, coupled with increasing debt, lead to macroeconomic volatility and financial sector stress on the one hand and weighed on investment and long-term economic growth on the other.

## **ABSENCE OF STRUCTURAL REFORMS**

Rather than pursuing deep structural reforms to address its chronic economic dysfunction, successive governments have opted for superficial fixes, keeping the economy afloat through temporary relief and political expediency. In just under eight decades, Pakistan has turned to the IMF no fewer than 25 times, a staggering testament to its unresolved macroeconomic fragility. In June–July 2023, the country narrowly escaped default with a critical US\$3 billion disbursement under a US\$6.5 billion bailout package initially negotiated in 2019.<sup>187</sup> This lifeline was followed by a 37-month EFF agreement in 2024, aimed at bolstering ‘macroeconomic stability’ and laying the foundation for ‘stronger, more inclusive and resilient growth’.<sup>188</sup>

While the IMF programme may have offered temporary respite, the policy inertia at home remains unchanged. This was recently highlighted by IMF, which expressed displeasure over Pakistan’s fiscal management. In its Governance and Corruption Diagnosis Assessment (GCDA), IMF categorically stated:

Despite some improvement in the last two years, Pakistan has consistently struggled with weak budget credibility, which has generated several macro-critical governance weaknesses ... there are a number of shortcomings in public investment management resulting in failure to protect funding for approved projects over

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<sup>187</sup> Shahbaz Rana, ‘Pakistan Gets \$3b IMF Breather’, *The Express Tribune*, 12 July 2023.

<sup>188</sup> IMF, ‘Pakistan: IMF Reaches Staff-Level Agreement on Economic Policies with Pakistan for 37-month Extended Fund Facility’, 12 July 2024.

the project life cycle and major project delays and cost increases in projects.<sup>189</sup>

The Shehbaz Sharif government, despite inheriting a precarious economic landscape, has echoed the familiar pattern of reactive policymaking – prolonging the fundamentals of crisis rather than correcting them. The reliance on external bailouts, without institutional reform or fiscal discipline, renders long-term sustainability elusive. The recurring pattern is symptomatic of deeper systemic malaise – fiscal indiscipline, political short-termism and an elite-led governance model that defers reform in favour of optics. Until Pakistan breaks this mould, IMF support will serve merely as a defibrillator – not a cure – for its economic afflictions.

## TAX-TO-GDP RATIO

There is growing unanimity among Pakistani economists, analysts and policy observers: without deep structural reforms, Pakistan's recurring economic crises will persist. The systemic vulnerabilities – ranging from fiscal indiscipline to weak revenue mobilisation – can no longer be resolved through short-term fixes or political improvisation. The Finance Minister, Muhammad Aurangzeb, in his 2025 budget speech, echoed this sentiment with caution and candour. He warned the House that meaningful progress would require patience, collective effort and a long-term outlook. Aurangzeb emphasized that sustainable development and economic recovery cannot be achieved overnight. Crucially, he underscored the need to broaden the tax base without placing additional burdens on existing taxpayers – a reform essential to fiscal equity and revenue stability. Yet, translating consensus into action remains a challenge.

Although successive governments in Pakistan have undoubtedly acknowledged the need for fundamental reforms, they have always

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<sup>189</sup> Khaleeq Kiani, 'IMF Slams Fiscal Mismanagement', *Dawn*, 26 November 2025.

struggled to execute it. Without a shift from rhetoric to results, Pakistan risks perpetuating a cycle of dependency, stagnation and vulnerability. It is important to note that the tax-to-GDP ratio is considered an important parameter to assess a state's capacity to mobilize required resources to fuel much-needed economic growth and development in the country. A higher tax-to-GDP ratio decreases the government's reliance on external funding agencies and helps fund its developmental expenditures using domestic resources. The tax-to-GDP ratio is a crucial metric for assessing a state's ability to mobilize domestic resources and sustainably finance economic growth. A higher ratio signifies fiscal self-reliance, reducing dependence on external lenders and enabling more effective development planning.

The World Bank recommends a benchmark of 15 per cent tax-to-GDP ratio as the tipping point for macroeconomic viability and growth resilience.<sup>190</sup> Pakistan, however, has consistently fallen short. With just five million out of 240 million citizens paying direct taxes, the gap underscores both administrative inefficiency and a deeper structural crisis in revenue mobilization. Over the past several years, Pakistan's tax-to-GDP ratio has stagnated between 8.4 and 9.8 per cent<sup>191</sup> – far below the regional average and well beneath the threshold required to stabilize its fiscal architecture. Under the terms of the ongoing 37-month EFF negotiated with the IMF, Islamabad aims to increase this ratio to 13 per cent, a target that remains ambitious given historical performance.

The Finance Minister, Muhammad Aurangzeb, projected a tax-to-GDP ratio of 10.6 per cent by the end of FY 2024–25.<sup>192</sup> Contrary to the

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<sup>190</sup> World Bank, 'Taxes and Government Revenue', 02 May 2025.

<sup>191</sup> Government of Pakistan, *Pakistan Economic Survey 2023-24*, Finance Division, Islamabad, 2024.

<sup>192</sup> 'Pakistan's Tax-to-GDP Ratio Expected to Hit 10.6% by June: FinMin', *The Express Tribune*, 2 May 2025.

trends, both the tax and non-tax revenues of Pakistan received a significant boost. The tax revenue increased by 25.8 per cent, whereas the non-tax revenue recorded a whopping 68 per cent rise.<sup>193</sup> However, one should be cautious while looking at the data as the devil is often in the detail. The improvement in tax and non-tax revenue collection became possible in the backdrop of high taxes imposed by the government to meet the IMF conditions and last-minute windfall from non-tax revenue.<sup>194</sup>

Without comprehensive reform – including expanding the tax base, improving compliance, and digitizing revenue administration – Pakistan’s fiscal vulnerability will persist. Unlike industrialized economies that rely on robust direct taxation systems, Pakistan remains heavily dependent on indirect taxes to meet its revenue targets. This regressive structure has long undermined fiscal equity while constraining the government’s capacity to pursue inclusive growth. The 2024–25 federal budget set an ambitious target of 3.6 per cent GDP growth for the fiscal year. However, recent assessments suggest that this projection is increasingly out of reach. A report by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) indicates that Pakistan will continue on its path of fiscal consolidation and economic reform under the IMF-supported programme.<sup>195</sup>

Crucially, the UN DESA’s statistical annex projected Pakistan’s actual GDP growth at just 2.3 per cent for FY 2025<sup>196</sup> – significantly below official estimates. This shortfall highlights the widening gap between budgetary ambition and economic reality, driven by structural

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<sup>193</sup> Government of Pakistan, *Pakistan Economic Survey 2024-25*, Ministry of Finance, Islamabad, 2025, p. 69.

<sup>194</sup> Khaleeq Kiani, ‘Non-tax Bonanza Pushes Tax Ratio to 21-Year High’, *Dawn*, 6 August 2025, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1929033> (Accessed on 7 August 2025).

<sup>195</sup> UN (2025), *World Economic Situation and Prospects 2025, Mid-Year Update*, 15 May 2025.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

inefficiencies, sluggish investment and low tax compliance. Without substantive reforms to broaden the tax base and reduce over-reliance on indirect taxation, Pakistan's growth narrative will remain more aspirational than achievable. Compared to mid-2023, Pakistan's economy shows modest signs of stabilisation, but this recovery remains fragile and uneven. Besides, the so-called economic revival has failed to address some of the basic questions. As per the 2023 census, unemployment has surged to 22.1 per cent compared to 6.3 per cent in 2021.<sup>197</sup> Real wages have declined almost 20 per cent over the last three years and about 92 per cent of private-sector employees did not receive any wage increment.<sup>198</sup> The relative macroeconomic stability did not translate into improvement in people's lives. The poverty reduction trajectory, as per the 2025 World Bank report, came to a grinding halt and reversed years of hard-fought gains.<sup>199</sup> It is important to note that Pakistan had drastically reduced poverty from 64.3 per cent in 2001 to 21.9 per cent in 2018.<sup>200</sup> However, recent shocks have increased the rates to 25.3 per cent by 2023–24.<sup>201</sup>

The absence of meaningful structural reforms continues to hamper economic resilience, leaving Pakistan vulnerable to both internal pressures and external shocks. The Asian Development Outlook Report 2025 underscores these concerns, noting that Pakistan faces enduring vulnerabilities and systemic impediments or structural challenges<sup>202</sup> to

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<sup>197</sup> Furqan Ali, 'Pakistan's Economic Crisis: Structural Reforms Needed For Sustainable Growth', *The Friday Times*, 6 March 2025.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> World Bank (2025), *Reclaiming Momentum Towards Prosperity: Pakistan's Poverty, Equity, and Resilience Assessment*, World Bank, Washington D.C., 2025, p. xiii.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> ADB (2025), *Asian Development Outlook April 2025: Trade Uncertainty, Challenges, Resilience in Asia and the Pacific*, Asian Development Bank, Manila, p. 176.

growth. Although there has been some traction in agriculture, industry and services, the overall recovery remains slow and precarious.<sup>203</sup> The economic fault line is not only visible to everyone, it comes to haunt Pakistan occasionally. Those at the helm both in Islamabad and Rawalpindi are aware of the risks of not addressing the economic fault lines. However, they remain complacent due to several reasons, including the informal economy running parallel to the formal one, availability of outside support due to the Pakistani state's rentier character and strategic location. It is an undisputed reality that Pakistan's economy has long been sustained not by productivity or domestic resource mobilization, but by loans, grants and aid. Successive governments have failed to initiate reforms that translate into tangible benefits for the broader population. The over-reliance on external lifelines has bred a cycle of dependency that is neither sustainable nor equitable. How long this model can endure is an open question, but its consequences are predictable. An economy teetering on collapse does more than disrupt domestic stability – it poses a broader geopolitical risk to the region. Without bold reform and inclusive growth strategies, Pakistan's economic trajectory risks deepening instability both at home and beyond its borders.

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid, p. 177.

## THE POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FAULT LINE

Political stability remains an indispensable prerequisite for democracy, justice and sustainable economic development. Yet, since its inception, Pakistan has been in a near-constant search for domestic equilibrium. The state institutions have hardly performed their mandated tasks well within the democratic and constitutional framework. Some institutions have acquired a larger-than-life role in the country and are, in a way, disproportionately wielding power and influence within the larger system. The military as an institution, particularly the army, has become the self-appointed guardian of the ‘territorial and ideological frontier’ of the Pakistani nation. The military, for all practical purposes, has hijacked the very state of Pakistan and strengthened itself enormously, and that too at the cost of other important institutions of the country. Their power and influence in the system has grown to such an extent that that they can suffocate any other institution at will. Many analysts are of the view that their constant intervention, often to secure their institutional and corporate interests, in the political arena has significantly weakened democratic institutions in the country. It is not a coincidence that, from Liaquat Ali Khan to Shehbaz Sharif, the country has seen at least 24 Prime Ministers assume office – an extraordinary churn that reflects deep institutional fragility. Notably, the first eight Prime Ministers were not directly elected by the people, as general elections for the National Assembly were yet to be introduced. Even political heavyweights – Nawaz Sharif (thrice elected), Benazir Bhutto and Shehbaz Sharif (twice each) and Imran Khan – were denied the opportunity to complete a full five-year term. Given the entrenched volatility, it remains uncertain whether Shehbaz Sharif will break the pattern.

## THE RECENT PHASE OF POLITICAL INSTABILITY

Today, Pakistani politics is visibly fractured, mirroring the sharp divisions within society itself. The fault lines now run deep between pro-Imran and anti-Imran factions. The current phase of political instability traces back to April 2022, when Imran Khan was removed via a constitutionally valid no-confidence motion. However, many analysts point to a more decisive factor: his deteriorating relationship with then-Chief of Army Staff Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa. The appointment of a new Director General of Inter-Services Intelligence (DG-ISI) is believed to have become the main bone of contention between Imran Khan and Gen. Bajwa. The other and equally more important issue was the non-performance of the government on certain critical issues, including the economy. As an image-conscious institution, the Pakistan Army could no longer ignore what it considered a challenge to its institutional and corporate interest. Gen. Bajwa wanted the incumbent DG-ISI Gen. Faiz Hameed to move out and command a Corps to become eligible for the position of Chief of Army Staff (COAS). In Pakistan, commanding a Corps is one of the essential requirements to become Army Chief. Imran Khan, on his part, wanted Gen. Faiz Hameed as DG-ISI to continue till the next general elections so that he could use him to keep the opposition in check and secure another term in office for himself.

It is important to note that, earlier, Faiz Hameed, then Director General Counter Intelligence (DG-C) in ISI, had played an instrumental role in ending the infamous Faizabad sit-in in November 2017 by Tehreek-e-Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah and signed the agreement between the protesters and the government as the guarantor.<sup>204</sup> Many believe that the sit-in was the handiwork of ISI to completely weaken the ruling PML-N's position in the country. The allegation carries some weight as an important ISI official became the guarantor of the agreement signed between the government and the protesters. Besides, the agreement

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<sup>204</sup> Amir Wasim and Munawer Azeem, 'Faizabad Sit-in Ends As Army Brokers Deal', *Dawn*, 28 November 2017.

also acknowledged the army chief's role, stating, 'We are thankful to him as he has saved the nation from facing a huge disaster'.<sup>205</sup> Later, Major General Azhar Naveed, the then Director General Pakistan Rangers (Punjab), was seen distributing cash to the protesters to make arrangements of their return from the protest site in Faizabad. The security establishment was not quite comfortable with Nawaz Sharif and looking for ways and means to get rid of him as early as possible. The 20-day-long Faizabad sit-in, in November 2017, completely discredited both the federal government in Islamabad and the Punjab provincial government. It exposed the inability of the civil administration to rein the protesters who were demanding the resignation of the Federal Law Minister, Zahid Hamid, for a minute change in the wording of the electoral oath for the parliamentarians in the Elections Bill 2017.

The timing of the sit-in was quite crucial. By that time, due to the Panama Papers Leak controversy, Nawaz Sharif was ousted from power and disqualified to hold any public office by the Supreme Court and preparations were underway by the security establishment to imprison him<sup>206</sup> on several trumped up charges related to corruption. On the other hand, the military's blue-eyed boy, Imran Khan, was riding a popularity wave, albeit a manufactured one, with the help of powers that be who wanted to install him as the next puppet prime minister of Pakistan. And most importantly, the next general election was around the corner. It is no secret how the security establishment got rid of Nawaz Sharif, weakened the PML-N and brought Imran Khan to power with a razor-thin majority, only to find him incapable of delivering on its priorities later. The military's favourite politicians acquiring their own voice is not uncommon in Pakistan's political history. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif both were initially the creations of the security establishment; however, in due course of time, both broke away and challenged the military's undue interference in the political domain.

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Usama Khawar, 'Revisiting the Faizabad Dharna Case', *Dawn*, 28 September 2023.

The Imran–Bajwa controversy became public when, on 6 October 2021, Gen. Bajwa nominated Lt. Gen. Nadeem Ahmed Anjum as the new ISI chief and posted Gen. Faiz Hameed as Commander of the Peshawar-based Corp-XI.<sup>207</sup> As per the long-held tradition, the appointment of the ISI chief was considered to be the prerogative of the prime minister, who duly consulted the army chief in finding the most suitable officer for the job. However, in practice, the decision of appointing the DG-ISI was always influenced and, in many cases, dictated by the incumbent army chiefs. About a week after Nadeem Ahmed Anjum's nomination, Imran Khan informed his cabinet colleagues that he himself told Gen. Bajwa that, due to critical developments in the region, Gen. Faiz Hameed needed to continue as the ISI chief.<sup>208</sup> No one believed that the issue between Bajwa and Imran Khan was peacefully resolved, as the social media in Pakistan was abuzz with reports of lack of consensus between the two over the appointment of the new ISI chief.

The contestation between the two escalated to such an extent that Bajwa reportedly threatened to resign from his position and later plotted to oust Imran Khan through a no-confidence motion in the parliament. Maulana Fazlur Rahamn, the head of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), revealed that Gen. Bajwa and Gen. Faiz Hameed were not only in touch with the opposition leaders, but also guided all political parties regarding the no-confidence vote against the Imran Khan government.<sup>209</sup> Following his ouster, Imran Khan unleashed a barrage of accusations against the security establishment and invoked several conspiracy theories, including claims of U.S. involvement in his downfall. Harnessing his popular appeal, Khan escalated pressure on

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<sup>207</sup> Baqir Sajjad Syed, 'ISI Gets New Chief in Army Reshuffle', *Dawn*, 7 October 2021.

<sup>208</sup> Syed Irfan Raza, 'PM Wants Current ISI Chief to Continue for Some Time: PTP', *Dawn*, 13 October 2021.

<sup>209</sup> 'Gen Faiz, Gen Bajwa orchestrated no-confidence move against Imran, claims Fazl', *Dawn*, 15 February 2024, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1814484> (Accessed on 16 February 2024).

both the military and the coalition government led by Shehbaz Sharif, demanding early national elections. As part of a political gambit, 123 PTI members of the National Assembly resigned en masse on 11 April 2024. This did not yield the desired outcome for the PTI, as the security establishment stood behind the PDM government led by Shehbaz Sharif.

The institutional standoff deepened further when the PTI dissolved the provincial assemblies of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Punjab in January 2023, invoking constitutional grounds to force at least provincial elections. Article 224 of the Constitution mandates elections within ninety days in case of premature dissolution of the assembly. Instead of announcing provincial elections, the political dispensation looked the other way, following which the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Umar Ata Bandial, took *suo motu* notice of the delay and directed the government to conduct elections in Punjab on 14 May 2023. However, with the security establishment backing the ruling coalition, the government chose defiance over constitutional compliance.

## THE MAY 9 INCIDENT

As Pakistan grappled with mounting political tensions between the ruling dispensation and PTI, the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) on 9 May 2023 arrested Imran Khan in the Al Qadir Trust corruption case, following which the PTI supporters went on a rampage across the country. In an unprecedented move, several installations belonging to the security establishment bore the brunt of the anger of the PTI activists, supporters and sympathisers. These included the Lahore Corps Commander's residence, Mianwali airbase, ISI building, Askari Bank, Askari Tower and the General Headquarters (GHQ) of the Pakistan Army in Rawalpindi. Never before in the history of Pakistan were military installations attacked by people in this manner.<sup>210</sup> Although Imran Khan was released on Supreme Court orders on 12 May, the symbolic

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<sup>210</sup> Zahid Hussain, 'The Lessons of May 9', *Dawn*, 28 June 2023, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1762163> (Accessed on 29 June 2023).

damage was already done. It was unprecedented in the history of Pakistan that the supporters of a political party, irrespective of its social strength and political capital, gathered the courage to target the most powerful institution of the country. Leaders of prominent political parties, such as Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto, all had their own share of disgruntlement and frustration with the security establishment due to its constant interference in the key areas of policy-making in the country. However, none of them went too far to encourage their followers to target the institutions that claimed to defend the territorial and ideological frontiers of the nation.

It is interesting to note that, at the time, PTI supporters were violating the sanctity of institutions, hitherto deemed untouchable, there was no serious attempt by the Pakistan Army to stop them. They could have brought everything under control quickly. However, the chaos continued to prevail hours after the arrest of Imran Khan. The visuals emerging out of some areas were really disturbing. The Jinnah House, the official residence of the Lahore Corps Commander, was ransacked. People were seen taking out food items from the refrigerators, while others took away valuable items, including furniture. One teenage supporter was seen wearing the official uniform of the Corp Commander, saying *ab aise hi chalega* [now, things will go like this]. There could possibly be two reasons that could explain the Army's inaction – firstly, the security establishment could not have predicted such an eventuality; and secondly, they deliberately allowed the chaos to occur in order to openly go after PTI, its leadership and supporters.

It was in this backdrop that Hamid Mir, the popular Geo TV anchor and host of Capital Talk, termed the incident to be the 9/11 of Pakistan. He was one of the many analysts who predicted a large-scale crackdown on PTI and its supporters. As expected, the security establishment used these attacks as a pretext to launch an unprecedented crackdown against PTI, its leaders, activists and supporters. A sweeping campaign was launched against PTI's leadership and rank-and-file, resulting in mass arrests spanning the party's top, middle and grassroots tiers. Soon, most of the prominent first-, second- and third-rung leadership of the PTI found themselves behind bars on both real and trumped-up charges, including Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Chaudhry Parvaiz Ilahi, Hassan Khan Niazi, Dr. Yasmin Rashid, Asad Umar, Ali

Muhammad Khan, Ejaz Chaudhry, Firdous Shamim Naqvi, Shehryar Khan Afridi, Shandana Gulzar, Omer Sarfraz Cheema, Haleem Adil Sheikh, Falak Naz, Aliya Hamza Malik, Sheikh Rashid, Farrukh Habib, Usman Dar and many more.<sup>211</sup>

Eventually, even Imran Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi were jailed, further intensifying the political rupture. More than a reaction to violence, the crackdown quickly morphed into a deliberate effort to dismantle PTI as an electoral force. The strategy was clear: engineer a political landscape favourable to the ruling coalition through coercion, defection and judicial manoeuvring. Scores of PTI leaders were pressured into severing ties with Khan, reportedly under threats of physical harm and mental duress. A significant number of 'electable' PTI leaders were forced to join two newly created political outfits, namely Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf Parliamentary (PTIP) and Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP). Those unwilling to join these outfits were forced to announce their retirement from politics. These tactics were primarily aimed to diminish the PTI's electoral prospects in elections. With the same token, there was also an attempt to draw a red line and dissuade other political parties from using similar tactics.

## **THE FEBRUARY 2024 ELECTIONS**

The ruling dispensation gained confidence after the way PTI was squeezed and crushed under the military boot, and they thought of making best use of the prevailing circumstances. Thus, disregarding the timeline set by the Supreme Court, overlooking the constitutional deadline and pushing the PTI to the wall through trumped-up charges against its leaders, illegal arrests, constant harassment, intimidation and torture, the politico-security elites decided to announce general elections in the country. The National Assembly was dissolved on 5 August 2023 and a caretaker government under Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar took charge to facilitate the 12th General Elections in the country. The PML-N emerged as the new favourite of the security establishment, which

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<sup>211</sup> 'High-profile PTI Politicians Facing Legal Action Since May 9 Riots', *Dawn*, 9 September 2023, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1774736> (Accessed on 10 September 2023).

agreed to help bring Nawaz Sharif back to the political landscape of Pakistan. In a completely changed political atmosphere, as the PTI's political fortune appeared to be dwindling down, Nawaz Sharif's fortunes dramatically rose. The same Supreme Court that had previously handed him a lifetime disqualification under Article 62(1)(f) of the Constitution now facilitated legal relief in multiple cases, paving the way for his political resurgence.<sup>212</sup> On 8 January 2024, Qazi Faez Isa—led seven-member Supreme Court bench with a 6-1 majority judgement quashed the lifetime disqualification of Nawaz Sharif, making him eligible to public office.

On 15 December 2023, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) finally issued notification to conduct the general elections on 8 February 2024.<sup>213</sup> Nawaz Sharif came back from exile to lead PML-N's electoral campaign, whereas PTI was forced to participate in the electoral exercise without Imran Khan and the top PTI leadership. In a final pre-election blow, PTI was even stripped of its iconic cricket bat symbol, forcing all its candidates to contest as independents in the February 2024 elections. The three-member bench headed by Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa declared that ECP 'has been calling upon the PTI to hold its intra-party elections since May 24, 2021 and at that time the PTI was in the federal government and in some provinces'.<sup>214</sup> There were some discrepancies on part of the PTI, however, the other political parties were not put through these conditions strictly. Many believe that Justice Isa settled a personal score with Imran Khan, as a reference was filed against him during Khan's tenure in office. The move to deprive the

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<sup>212</sup> Haseeb Bhatti, 'SC Rules Against Lifetime Disqualification; Nawaz and Tareen Eligible to Contest Polls', *Dawn*, 8 January 2024, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1804198> (Accessed on 9 January 2024).

<sup>213</sup> 'Election Commission of Pakistan Notification', Election Commission of Pakistan, 15 December 2023, available at <https://ecp.gov.pk/notifications/election-schedule-general-elections-2024> (Accessed on 16 December 2023).

<sup>214</sup> Haseeb Bhatti, 'PTI Battered, Loses Iconic Electoral Symbol as SC Restores ECP order', *Dawn*, 13 January 2024.

electoral symbol fractured PTI's electoral identity and severely weakened its capacity to mobilize support across constituencies.

The 2024 general elections in Pakistan unfolded around a singular, polarizing issue: the incarceration of Imran Khan. Contesting under hostile conditions, without the support of the security establishment and stripped of their electoral symbol, PTI-affiliated independents defied expectations, emerging as the single largest group in the National Assembly with 92 seats. They were followed by Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) with 75 seats, Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians (PPPP) with 54 and other minor parties – MQM-P (17), JUI-F (4), PML-Q (3), and IPP (2).

**Table 2. 2024 Pakistan General Election results.**

Political Party	National Assembly	Provincial Assemblies: Punjab	Sindh	Balochistan	KP
PTI-backed	92	116	11	0	84
PML-N	75 [19*+4**]	137 [36*+5**]	0	10 [3*+1**]	5 [2*]
PPP	54 [12*+2**]	10 [3]	84 [20*+6**]	11 [3*+1**]	4 [1*]
MQM	17 [4*+1**]	0	28 [6*+2*]	0	0
Others	9	22	3	5	8
JUI-F	4 [1*]	0	0	11 [2*+1**]	7 [2*]
PML-Q	3 [1*]	7 [2*]	0	0	0
IPP	2 [1*]	1 [1*]	0	0	0
BNP	2	0	0	2	0
PML-Z	1	1	0	0	0
MWM	1	0	0	0	0
PNAP	1	0	0	0	0
BAP	1			4	0
PkMAP	1	0	0	0	0
NP	1	0	0	3 [1*]	0
TLP	0	1	0	0	0
ANP	0	0	0	2 [1*]	1
Haq Do Tehreek	0	0	0	1	0

GDA	0	0	3 [1*]	0	0
Jl	0	0	2	1	2
Pakistan Rah-e-Haq	0	0	0	1	0
BNP-A	0	0	0	1	0
PTI-P	0	0	0	0	2

**Note:** \* Seats allocated to Women; \*\* Seats allocated to minorities.

**Source:** Compiled from data from Election Commission, Geo TV and *The Dawn*.

Despite lacking a simple majority, the PTI secured a clear mandate in KP, allowing it to form the provincial government. However, at the national level, political engineering prevailed. With decisive backing from the security establishment, Shehbaz Sharif became Prime Minister, heading a coalition with PPP offering external support. This was made possible only after the security establishment forced the two mainstream political parties to come together to form the government. The Election Commission denied PTI any seats reserved for women and non-Muslims. Instead, it initially allotted 10 women's seats and four non-Muslim seats to PML-N, 12 women's seats and two non-Muslim seats to PPP and four women's and one non-Muslim seat to MQM-P. JUI-F, PML-Q and IPP received one women's seat each. After a prolonged judicial battle, PTI did get some relief from the Supreme Court. On 12 July 2024, a 13-member Supreme Court bench headed by Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa, through a 8-5 majority judgement, declared PTI eligible to receive its share of reserved seats.<sup>215</sup> However, the ECP did not allot it any reserve seat and later a constitutional bench of the Supreme Court overturned the earlier judgement,<sup>216</sup> ensuring that the

<sup>215</sup> Abdullah Momand (2024), 'Major Win for PTI as Supreme Court Rules Party Eligible for Reserved Seats', *Dawn*, 12 July 2024, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1845359> (Accessed on 14 July 2024).

<sup>216</sup> 'PTI's Hopes Dashed as Rivals Set to Receive Reserved Seats', *Dawn*, 28 June 2025, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1920721> (Accessed on 30 June 2025).

The post-election contestation between PTI and the ruling dispensation persisted across Islamabad and provincial capitals. PTI responded with a three-pronged strategy to counterbalance its exclusion from the federal power structure:

1. **Street Mobilization:** Leveraging control of the KP administration, PTI orchestrated regular protest marches, applying pressure on the ruling coalition.
2. **Judicial Activism:** PTI leaders pursued legal remedies through the High Courts and Supreme Court. While intermittent relief was secured, it rarely translated into substantive change, as institutional resistance diluted judicial outcomes.
3. **Backchannel Negotiations:** PTI leadership quietly sought engagement with the security establishment, primarily focused on securing Imran Khan's release and recalibrating political space.

This sequence reflects a deeper tension between electoral legitimacy and power brokerage – an enduring theme in Pakistan's civil–military political landscape. PTI's resilience, even under institutional siege, underscores both the volatility of Pakistani democracy and the fragility of its constitutional architecture. With the backing of Pakistan's security establishment, the Shehbaz Sharif government implemented a calibrated strategy to neutralize PTI's post-election resistance. The approach relied on a triad of tactics: persuasion, intimidation and selective use of force to deflate protests and fragment party unity.

## LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

Backchannel negotiations between the PTI and the security establishment served more as tactical diversions than genuine attempts at reconciliation. These dialogues – often initiated without intention to meet the PTI's core demands – functioned primarily to buy time and extract conditional cooperation from the PTI leadership when politically expedient. Predictably, this pattern yielded minimal concessions. Despite repeated overtures by PTI figures, including former President Arif Alvi, the only tangible relief came in October 2024 with the release of Bushra Bibi. Even this was made possible through PTI's indirect cooperation in Parliament, underscoring how transactional engagement

had replaced institutional dialogue. The passage of the 26th Constitutional Amendment exemplifies this dynamic. By empowering a parliamentary committee to appoint the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court – effectively dismantling the principle of seniority – it marked a watershed moment in Pakistan’s judicial politics. The amendment, passed amid PTT’s muted participation, reveals how legislative micromanagement became a tool to reshape institutional hierarchies and consolidate executive authority.

Taken together, these manoeuvres signal a deeper shift in Pakistan’s political architecture, where power is negotiated not through constitutional fidelity but through orchestrated consent and strategic coercion. The amended Article 175A (iii) now reads:

... the Chief Justice of Pakistan shall be nominated by the Special Parliamentary Committee, in this Article referred to as the Committee, from amongst the three most senior Judges of the Supreme Court. The Committee shall send the names of the nominee to the Prime Minister who shall forward the same to the President for appointment ... The Committee shall consist of the following twelve members (i) eight members from the National Assembly; and (ii) four members from the Senate.<sup>217</sup>

## THE TAMING OF THE JUDICIARY

On 20 and 21 October 2024, Pakistan’s National Assembly and Senate passed the controversial 26th Constitutional Amendment, its singular aim being to block Justice Mansoor Ali Shah from ascending to the position of Chief Justice. Justice Shah had played a pivotal role in the Supreme Court’s 8-5 majority verdict, which declared PTT eligible for reserved seats<sup>218</sup> in both the national and provincial assemblies, a ruling that significantly unsettled the prevailing power calculus. In June 2025,

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<sup>217</sup> Text of the 26th Constitutional Amendment, National Assembly, Islamabad.

<sup>218</sup> Abdullah Momand, note no. 215.

a constitutional bench headed by Justice Aminuddin Khan reversed the earlier decision. With a 7-3 majority, the bench declared the 12 July verdict of the Supreme Court null and void.<sup>219</sup>

It is important to mention that PTI was able to secure some relief on 23 October, when Bushra Bibi, Imran Khan's wife, was granted bail and released, a move widely interpreted as political *quid pro quo*. Her release coincided with PTI's quiet cooperation in parliamentary proceedings, enabling the passage of the 26<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment, which dismantled the long-standing seniority principle for judicial appointments and vested that authority in a parliamentary committee. Emboldened by this transactional success, the security establishment secured even greater concessions on 4 November 2024. In a stunning display of procedural opacity, six key bills were pushed through Parliament in under an hour without debate. These included measures that dramatically altered the composition and tenure of Pakistan's judicial and military leadership:

- The number of judges in the Supreme Court was expanded from 17 to 34, and in the Islamabad High Court from 9 to 12, enabling a tailored realignment of the judiciary.
- The tenures of Pakistan's three Services Chiefs were extended from three to five years, with a clear objective: ensuring continuity of Gen. Asim Munir as Chief of Army Staff until November 2027.

This legislative blitz, engineered through institutional pressure and behind-the-scenes bargaining, reflects a deliberate recalibration of Pakistan's power architecture. Judicial independence, constitutional procedure and democratic norms were subordinated to elite interests bent on securing long-term dominance. PTI refrained from strongly

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<sup>219</sup> 'PTI Loses Reserved Seats as SC Overturns July 12 Ruling', *The Express Tribune*, 27 June 2025, available at <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2552947/justice-salahuddin-panhwar-recuses-himself-from-bench-hearing-reserved-seats-case> (Accessed on 28 June 2025).

objecting to the legislative manoeuvre, hoping that compliance might secure Imran Khan's release. What the party failed to anticipate was the possibility of indefinite delay. The relief granted to Bushra Bibi turned out to be false – in the wake of conviction in the £190 million case, she was re-arrested and jailed on 17 January 2025.<sup>220</sup> With these moves, Gen. Asim Munir obtained a full term as Chief of Army Staff until November 2027. However, that was not sufficient. The ruling dispensation and the security establishment wanted to consolidate their position further.

Both the houses of Majlis-e-Shoora (Senate and National Assembly) passed the 27th Constitutional Amendment in November 2025, which introduced structural changes in the judiciary and the armed forces. Through these amendments, a new Federal Constitutional Court (FCC) has been created, which will have exclusive jurisdiction in constitutional matters. It will also hear cases related to fundamental rights of the citizens of the country. The decision of the FCC will be binding on all existing courts, including the Supreme Court. What is surprising here is the fact that there will be no right of appeal against the decisions of the FCC. On 14 November, Justice Aminuddin Khan was appointed the inaugural Chief Justice of the FCC. The introduction of FCC has downgraded the existing Supreme Court's status and restricted it to civil and criminal appeals only.

Besides the judiciary, the 27th Amendment also paved the way for the overhauling of the military command structure in the country. It abolished the office of the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJCSC) and gave the Chief of Army Staff dual role as the Chief of Defence Forces (CDF) who will consolidate command over Army, Navy and Air Force. It also granted five-star officers lifetime immunity and allowed them to 'retain rank, privileges and remain in uniform for

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<sup>220</sup> 'Bushra Bibi Arrested After Conviction in £190m Case', *The Express Tribune*, 17 January 2025, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2522733/bushra-bibi-arrested-after-court-convicts-her-in-190m-case> (Accessed on 18 January 2025).

life'. Asim Munir is the direct beneficiary of these changes, as he was made Field Marshal (Five Star Officer) after India's Operation Sindoor. As Chief of Defence Staff, he will be granted a fresh five-year term, which effectively means that his tenure would last till 2030. Commenting on the developments, Zahid Hussain termed it the darkest moment in the constitutional history of Pakistan, stating that 'while the 26<sup>th</sup> Amendment had shaken the very foundation of the trichotomy of power, the 27<sup>th</sup> has virtually murdered the Constitution'.<sup>221</sup> Through these changes, the government and security establishment have effectively consolidated their positions, and PTI finds itself with diminishing leverage.

The political and institutional fault line in Pakistan has somewhat become the permanent feature of the hybrid system in place where instability is treated as the new norm. The politico-security elites find it convenient to manage the affairs of the state. The security establishment, in particular, has historically been making efforts to capture the state apparatus to influence/implement the public policies in key areas. Besides being at the helm of affairs, during a military dictatorship, they have tried and tested multiple options, including the Troika System, where power was shared between three offices – the President, Prime Minister and Chief of Army Staff. The security establishment often uses the mainstream opposition to create pressure on the ruling party and then uses President's power under Article 58 (2) (b) to dissolve the parliament.

In the post-Musharraf period, the 18th Constitutional Amendment prevented the president from misusing constitutional provisions to dissolve the parliament. Following this, the security establishment invented a new way through judiciary by relying on Article 62 (1) (f) to remove any member of parliament by selectively applying the criteria of being *Sadiq* and *Ameen* (Truthful and Trustworthy/Honest). The provision, if applied universally, can send each and every member of

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<sup>221</sup> Zahid Hussain, 'Killing the Constitution', *Dawn*, 12 November 2025, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1954621/killing-the-constitution> (Accessed on 13 November 2025).

parliament home. Nawaz Sharif, in his third term, was not only removed by the judiciary through Article 62 (1) (f) but banned from assuming public offices in his lifetime. It is a different matter that the ban was removed by the re-interpretation of the same constitutional provision by the apex court at a time when the security establishment was up against Imran Khan and the PTI. This time, they again used the opposition parties to topple Imran Khan's government through a no-confidence motion. This indicates that the security establishment uses various means and mechanisms to achieve its desired objective.

The security establishment is undoubtedly the senior partner in the current hybrid regime at the helm. What makes this regime different from the earlier ones is the fact that the security establishment is completely micromanaging the affairs of the Pakistani state. Unlike in the past, two of the mainstream parties – PML-N and PPP – are toeing the line of powers that be. The Shehbaz Sharif-led PML-N government desires to continue its term in office, whereas the Bilawal Bhutto-led PPP is playing its cards carefully to ensure that they remain in the good books of the security establishment on the one hand, and continue to be an alternative, if the time comes, on the other.

There appears to be no serious challenge to this rotten system from within the country. It seems that almost every section of the Pakistani society and institutions have accepted it as a *fait accompli*. The security establishment is here to stay with all its strength and influence over the larger state apparatus. Instead of waning, their power and influence is increasing day by day. Given the history, ruling political elites as well as those in opposition have reconciled with the powerful security establishment and have no real agenda to challenge its undue interference in the policy-making. The political elites now look at the security establishment to either get some concession or support to advance their political interests within the system. This entrenched imbalance has normalised political instability in Pakistan. In Islamabad and Rawalpindi, volatility is tolerated, as long as it does not jeopardise its core institutional interests.

The prevailing elite consensus seems less invested in democratic continuity than in preserving control through managed fragmentation. History suggests that people do not tolerate the security establishment much,

especially if it fails to deliver on the ground. It is not a coincidence that almost all the military leaders became quite unpopular at the end of their tenures. It is for time to tell if Asim Munir will meet the same fate or create a new precedence in the country. However, his legacy of micromanaging the affairs of the state is expected to outlast him, making it difficult to effectively address the political and institutional fault lines in the country.

## CONCLUSION

Pakistan's internal fault lines, both entrenched and emerging, cut deep into the national psyche, posing grave challenges to state stability and societal cohesion. These fractures are not episodic; they reflect an enduring crisis of identity, governance and institutional integrity. The politico-security elite that dominate the levers of power continue to prioritise partisan interests and tactical gains over the broader needs of the populace. Instead of building national unity or investing in systemic reform, their calculus remains narrowly driven, shaped by short-term survival rather than long-term vision.

Compounding these structural dysfunctions is the persistent ideological entrapment in the defunct 'Two-Nation Theory'. This ideological fault line, the mother of other fault lines in the country, is not only alive today, it has also been ingrained in the very psyche of Pakistan. The Grand National Narrative in Pakistan has been carefully crafted around Islamic ideology, with India as a persistent existential threat. The security establishment, which has, for all practical purposes, hijacked the state of Pakistan in every sense, proclaims to defend both the territorial and ideological frontiers of Pakistan. This claim has never been effectively challenged by anyone in the country. Those making even the slightest of attempts are dealt strictly by the powers that be. It is not a coincidence that politico-security elites continue to refer to it every now and then.

In mid-April 2025, while interacting with overseas Pakistanis, Gen. Asim Munir cautioned the audience (and it was also meant to send out a message to the people of Pakistan) not to forget the story of Pakistan and the struggle of its forefathers. He was categorical in referring to the 'Two-Nation Theory', and reiterated the so-called differences between Hindus and Muslims. This is something every single political and military leader of Pakistan of some standing and repute has said at some point of time in history. However, they fail to explain why Muslims in Pakistan are baying for the blood of their fellow Muslims in the so-called homeland for Muslims. And most importantly, how

the neighbouring India has successfully assimilated Muslims in its national and constitutional framework. India has established itself as a secular state, having over 200 million Muslims living in complete peace and tranquillity with other religious groups, including the Hindus. The problem with Pakistan is that it has reinforced identity anxieties – rather than fostering inclusive citizenship – and seeded generational dissonance across ethnic, linguistic and sectarian lines. The result: a deepening radicalisation of public discourse and a surge in sectarianism that has corroded Pakistan’s social fabric.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Pakistan’s radical and sectarian fault line is closely connected with the ideological fault line. Moreover, there is no serious effort to review the existing social contract in Pakistan, and the radical and sectarian fault lines are deepening in the country. In present circumstances, one may not see the violent manifestation of it across the length and breadth of the country; however, that does not make it less important and relevant, as it has definitely negatively affected the societal relations in the country. Historically, Deobandi groups dominated the discourse in the country, but the rise of a strong Barelvi extremist outfit has somewhat accentuated the already fragile relations between various sects and sub-sects of Islam. As far as sectarian violence is concerned, one cannot ignore the situation in the tribal belt bordering Afghanistan, where Shia and Sunni outfits often find themselves involved in bloody engagement.

The fragility of intra-sect relations was also underlined by a recent study in which it was established that about 40 per cent of young men and 50 per cent of young women in Pakistan disapprove of having friendly relations with people from other religion or sect.<sup>222</sup> As the politico-security elites have turned a blind eye towards the issue and not making definite efforts to involve its youth in constructive endeavours, the radical Islamist groups could trap them to indoctrinate and divert their energies in destructive projects. What is more alarming

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<sup>222</sup> Adil Najam, note no. 13.

is the absence of any serious institutional or political effort to arrest this descent – allowing extremism to fester and ideological polarisation to harden into default narratives.

The ethnic fault lines in the country are exacerbating due to the non-accommodative approach adopted by the politico-security elites at the helm in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. The fault line in Balochistan has widened beyond repair because of an iron-hand approach adopted by the security establishment. Pakistan's deliberate attempt to bring an outside power (read China) into the exploitation project has backfired. Baloch are extremely opposed to Pakistan and China's joint exploitation project in the region. They are convinced that Pakistan's narrative on CPEC and other projects involving China is deeply fallible, as its sole aim is to extract natural resources from Balochistan without giving due benefit to the indigenous people. The feeling of suffocation and marginalisation among the Baloch nationalists have reached an all-time high due to which they have lost hopes of a normal and peaceful life in a united Pakistan.

The Pashtuns of KP have a long list of genuine grievances, which they want Islamabad and Rawalpindi to jointly address so that the people get a sense of relief. At present, the disgruntlement with state institutions, including the federal government, provincial government and the security establishment, is quite high. However, unlike Baloch, they have not so far demonstrated any separatist tendency or waged any armed struggle. The movement for Pashtun rights and liberties has largely been peaceful and there appears to be no sign of it getting violent in near future. However, the way Pakistan has responded to this movement and their call for justice has raised certain pertinent questions. Some analysts believe that Pakistan's armed forces find it difficult to deal with a non-violent social movement. They often see such movements as a threat to national security in general and their institutional interests in particular. There is a tendency in Pakistan to suppress any social movement by terming them anti-national and instigated by an outside power. The security establishment has termed PTM anti-national and accused it of receiving support from the outside. Such an approach often runs the risk of alienating the people further. If the politico-security elites remain indifferent to the Pashtuns of KP, the nation may witness insurgency like situation in strategically important tribal belt of the country.

The economic fault line remains the same, despite some improvement due to IMF's EEF. There is no serious attempt to bring about meaningful structural reforms to address basic issues in Pakistan's economy, making it vulnerable to internal pressures and external shocks. The fault line is not only visible to everyone but also has come to haunt Pakistan at regular intervals. Those managing the state of affairs are wise enough to know the reality but remain complacent due to several reasons, including the size of the informal economy running parallel to the formal one, which absorbs the shocks, and the elite's ability to extract help at critical moments from global powers, who have factored in the strategic location of the country and extended such help out of fear that a failed Pakistan might destabilise the neighbourhood in all directions. The economy has historically been dependent on outside support in the form of loans, grants, aid and assistance, which has led the rulers to believe that they could manage their affairs without resorting to much-needed structural reforms. The important question which people often ask is how long this model can endure.

As far as the political and institutional fault line is concerned, it has somewhat become the permanent feature of the state apparatus, where a hybrid system functions with the military calling the shots on important issues. The security establishment has both engendered political instability and tried to manage it by various means. Almost every section of the Pakistani society is convinced that the security establishment is here to stay and other institutions have to accept it as a *fait accompli*. The political elites in the country have somewhat reconciled with the security establishment and no longer look for any meaningful change in this respect. Instead, they seek concessions or support from it to advance their own partisan political interests. It is not surprising that a section of the Pakistani society has begun to view politics as a kind of job in which politicians make an all-out effort to satisfy their employer i.e. the security establishment. This entrenched imbalance has normalised political instability to the extent that volatility is tolerated as long as it does not jeopardise the security establishment's core institutional interests. This state of affairs has wider implications for internal security and regional peace.

It is no secret that Pakistan's enduring reliance on non-state actors as instruments of its regional policy (particularly *vis-à-vis* India) has birthed a Frankenstein's monster – one that now routinely threatens its internal cohesion, peace and societal stability. Designed as strategic assets, these actors have outgrown their utility, becoming liabilities that imperil both domestic order and regional diplomacy. This doctrine of outsourcing foreign policy to proxies has repeatedly vitiated the regional environment and pushed Pakistan into escalatory confrontations with its neighbours, especially India and Afghanistan. Far from advancing national interest, this approach has seeded distrust, provoked backlash and undermined the credibility of Pakistan's diplomatic engagements. The growing tension between Pakistan and Afghanistan threatens peace and tranquillity in the already fragile state of KP. Pakistan is also rattled because of the growing normalisation between India and the Taliban leadership. Analysts believe that the recent strikes by Pakistan inside Afghan territory was part of a messaging to Taliban leadership about their growing closeness with India.

Domestically, the strategy of using terror outfits as strategic assets has contributed to the rising securitisation of national discourse. As narratives shift toward militarised nationalism, non-democratic forces tighten their grip on power, steadily eroding Pakistan's already fragile democratic institutions. In present circumstances, the present Army Chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir, appears to be micromanaging the affairs of the state which in no way could be considered a good sign for Pakistan. The recent legal and constitutional changes suggest that he is in complete command and control of things in Pakistan. The civilian regime under Shehbaz Sharif is no more than a puppet ready to dance to the tune of its master. A state unable to strengthen its democratic architecture cannot effectively address the underlying fault lines – ethnic divisions, economic marginalisation, and institutional decay – that threaten its long-term viability.

The people of Pakistan, especially its working class and youth, are the ultimate casualties of this model. The state has prioritised guns over butter, funnelling resources into military adventurism while neglecting investment in human capital, education, healthcare and civic infrastructure. Ordinary citizens are often reduced to mere cannon fodder in a geopolitical game that disproportionately benefits a narrow

elite. External economic and military aid, while framed as national support, primarily serves the interests of the entrenched elite in the corridors of power.

Pakistan today stands as a cautionary tale: a nation where strategic overreach collides with institutional inertia, eroding democratic norms and dimming prospects of meaningful development. The convergence of elite-driven power consolidation and systemic dysfunction has hollowed out the foundations of governance, leaving political legitimacy, social cohesion and economic viability increasingly brittle. If this trajectory continues unchecked, Pakistan's internal fault lines will deepen beyond repair, undermining its capacity to function as a coherent state or a credible nation. Ethnic discontent, ideological extremism and institutional decay are no longer isolated crises but symptoms of a larger structural unravelling. Given the history and recent development, it seems Pakistan is not ready to learn any meaningful lesson to resolve some of the outstanding and fundamental issues in the country.

The approach adopted by Pakistan's politico-security elite – managing dissent through coercion, deflection and denial and nurturing non-state actors as instruments of its policy *vis-à-vis* its neighbours – may temporarily preserve control but will ultimately come at an enormous cost. It risks shattering the very monolith it seeks to protect, pushing Pakistan closer to the brink of international pariah status: a failed and rogue state straying away from constitutional order and global norms. The current crisis demands more than mere tactical manoeuvring; it requires a profound commitment to inclusive governance, the rule of law and national accountability. To settle for anything less would not only betray Pakistan's democratic ideals but also pose a grave threat to regional stability.

**P**akistan is passing through one of the most difficult periods in its history. There appears to be no easy solution with regard to the multifaceted crisis in which the nation finds itself entangled. The societal fabric is being torn apart along ethno-linguistic and politico-religious lines. Prominent state institutions no longer follow the constitutional rulebook and often overstep to violate the established system of checks and balances. Some home-grown radical Islamic and religious extremist outfits are threatening to overthrow the existing state apparatus to establish an Afghan Taliban-style emirate in the country. Against this background, the present study identifies and analyses five distinct fault lines in the country that Pakistan has miserably failed to manage effectively. The study offers an in-depth analysis of the existing and emerging fault lines and contextualises them in light of recent developments in the country.

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