



Obstructing Peace: A Study of the Structural Barriers Undermining Civil Society’s Peace-building Efforts in Pakistan

¹Muhammad Ejaz

²Dr. Muhammad Rizwan

³Dr. Adil Khan

¹Assistant Professor, Government Postgraduate College Mansehra/PhD Scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, Hazara University Mansehra

²Associate Professor, Department of Pakistan Studies, Abbottabad University of Science & Technology (AUST), Abbottabad, KP.

³Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and International Relations, Hazara University, Mansehra.

meaabbasi85@gmail.com, drmuhammadrizwan_hu@yahoo.com

adilseemab@gmail.com

Abstract

This study was an endeavor to critically examine the structural barriers that hinder civil society peace-building initiatives in Pakistan. Pakistan has been facing ethnic and religious conflicts for a long time, and the state’s non-constructive responses have further aggravated the situation. Civil society emerged as an alternative channel for peace, but to date, it has failed to make an impression because of the structural barriers. The research revealed that there are three types of structural obstacles. A legacy of authoritarian rule, shaped by colonialism, military dominance, and weak democratic institutions, has created deep mistrust toward peace CSOs. Bureaucratic red tape, surveillance, and threats limit their ability to operate effectively. The state’s ideological alignment with conservative religious forces, supported by clerics and security agencies, has further marginalized pluralistic and rights-based narratives. Civil societies promoting inclusion are often branded as anti-state and un-Islamic, facing both legal and societal backlash. Additionally, civic engagement and volunteerism are weak and mostly informal, usually driven by religious motives rather than a broader vision for social change. The state’s security-first mindset diverts resources from social development. This study found that this process led to fragmented, reactive, and vulnerable civil society efforts, eroding public trust and limiting long-term impact. CSOs remain isolated and under-resourced, unable to challenge systemic injustices or contribute meaningfully to democratic development. The study concludes that sustainable peace in Pakistan requires a shift toward inclusive governance, ideological pluralism, and recognition of civil society as a legitimate partner. Reforms in education, media, and civic infrastructure, along with institutionalized state-CSO collaboration, are essential to enabling a more effective and transformative role for civil society in peace-building. This study employs a qualitative methodology and a descriptive and analytical approach. Primary data was gathered through interviews and personal observation. In contrast, secondary data includes books, academic articles, and reports. Researchers interviewed fifteen (15) activists and observed six (6) activities across five cities in Pakistan and conducted a thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and core issues.

Key Words: Conflicts, violence, peace-building, civil society, structural barriers, security, ideology, volunteerism, pluralism

Article Details:

Received on 12 July 2025

Accepted on 11 Aug 2025

Published on 13 Aug 2025

Corresponding Authors*:

Dr. Muhammad Rizwan

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War, conflicts have increasingly become internal, driven by ethnic and religious identity tensions, rather than traditional wars between states (Gawerc, 2006). Civil society Organizations (CSOs) often become a vital player in peace-building in nations impacted by political unrest and violence. It acts as a channel between the Government and the public, offering forums for communication, accountability, and community mobilization. In this context, CSOs' peace-building encompasses more than just conflict resolution; it also involves more extensive initiatives to address the underlying causes of violence and social disintegration, such as identity politics, economic disparity, social exclusion, and weak institutions (Rupesinghe, 1995; Lederach, 1997; Orjuela, 2008).

Pakistan is a security state; therefore, peace has always held little value, and the passions for wars and conflicts repeatedly overshadowed the desire for harmony. The peace movements of the CSOs are relatively young, as Pasha et al. (2002) did not include the peace interventionist CSOs when they discussed the kinds of active NGOs in Pakistan. But in the wake of 9/11, things shifted, and more than 100 national CSOs are now promoting peace in the country (Ahmed, 2012). The efforts of the CSOs have received appreciation from the national and international forums. Mirahmadi et.al (2015) noted that through important channels and activities, CSOs have contributed significantly to the execution of peace efforts. Qazi (2013) remarked that because of their non-partisan character, pragmatism, practical access, socially sensitive attitude, and local knowledge, CSOs are better participants in identity conflicts.

Despite the recognition of international forums and some short-term impacts on peace-building, the CSOs of Pakistan have failed to transform the culture of violence into a culture of peace (Hashmi 2013). Even some of the authors, such as Sattar (2011), remarked that CSOs in Pakistan have failed to make any impression on harmony. The main reason for the low influence is the presence of disabling factors in the form of structural, procedural, and internal barriers that hinder its growth (Iqbal et al., 2004; Bano, 2008; Ahmed, 2012; Ejaz & Khan, 2021). In reality, originally, firmly ingrained structural obstacles seriously limit civil society's ability to be a force for peace-building. These debilitating factors include the state's ideological underpinnings, which emphasize a limited and frequently exclusive conception of national identity. The elites' long-standing control over state institutions limits democratic participation and marginalizes grassroots actors. The general disregard for civic engagement is demonstrated by the restrictions placed on CSOs by the law, bureaucracy, and security. These are not mere hurdles to overcome; instead, they are systemic issues that influence the entire civic and political ecosystem.

This study is an attempt to critically identify and analyze the structural barriers that hinder the peace-building efforts of the CSOs. Further, to evaluate the negative impact of these barriers that undermine the independence of CSOs and to propose context-sensitive and practical recommendations for reforming the existing system and creating an enabling environment for CSOs' peace initiatives. The main objectives of the research are to categorize and critically assess the main structural obstacles that prevent Pakistani civil society from participating in peace-building projects. To determine how these systemic barriers affect civil society activism's efficacy, independence, and durability. To make practical, situation-specific suggestions for improving the autonomy and operational space of CSOs engaged in peace-building.

There are five major sections of the paper. The literature in this area is examined in the next section. The research's theoretical stances are covered in the third section. The

methodology is covered in the fourth part. The structural barriers and their impacts are discussed in the fifth section. The conclusion, which comes last, includes a summary of the work, key findings, suggestions, and future directions for investigation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing body of research on local peace-building theories, methods, and practices has evolved because of the relative success of peace movements of CSOs over the years. The CSO literature is particularly well-known in international settings, but in South Asia, its breadth and depth are still constrained. It is also notable that although the enabling roles of CSOs in peace-building have been studied, relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to the institutional and structural obstacles they encounter. Except for Paffenholz's (2010) groundbreaking work, which discussed a few debilitating elements, the literature is mainly silent on this topic. In Pakistan, the studies related to CSOs generally focus on governance, security, and development issues. The research explicitly addressing the disabling elements of civil society actors in promoting peace is still rare and dispersed. The existing scientific and policy-based works on the subject were examined in this review of the literature, with an emphasis on the structural obstacles that prevent civil society from acting as a transformational force for peace-building.

Since 1990, the number of intra-state conflicts has increased significantly, and societal warfare now affects one-third of the world's nations (Gawerc, 2006). Since the issue and focus of these disputes are the rights of the communal groups, they are frequently referred to as ethnic, identity, and deep-rooted conflicts (Burton, 1987; Lederach, 1997; Orjuela, 2008; Paffenholz, 2010). The groups in these conflicts compete for conflicting collective objectives. Although there are various reasons for this, some groups believe that their unique identity is the reason for the violence and discrimination they face. These disputes stem from basic human demands, such as identification and recognition that cannot be compromised. Since ethnic disputes are between local communal factions rather than armies, the employment of state actors and formal diplomacy has not been successful in resolving them (Burton, 1987; Oberschall, 2007; Cordell & Wolff, 2011). This transition caused academics and policymakers to focus on creative strategies instead of lingering with traditional ones. In Pakistan, Ethno-national factions emerged from the fear of linguistic and cultural identity brought on by the state's plan of single nationalism and political and economic marginalization (Rahman, 1996; Majeed, 2010; Akhtar, 2013; Ejaz et al., 2023; Ejaz et al., 2024a; Ejaz et al., 2024b). Muhajirs, Baloch, Sindhis, Pashtuns, Siraiki, and Hazariwals are the ethno-national elements. As a result of the state's excessive Islamization after the 1970s, religious groups were politicized. Furthermore, they were empowered to curtail and defuse the powers of political identities (Haleem, 2003; Waseem, 2011). Jihadi militants and sectarians are the two main ethno-religious groups.

The role of local players in peace-building has been overlooked by international approaches and practices (Orjuela, 2008). These conflicts have their origins in societies where the state no longer has a monopoly on organized violence and, on the one hand, lacks legitimacy. Furthermore, Leeuwen (2008) noted that these confrontations were now between local and regional factions rather than state forces. This development diverted the attention of international researchers, and policymakers realized that these disputes could not be settled externally or from above. According to Rupesinghe (1995), civil societies are a preferable choice because they are the main parties and owners of the conflicts. Furthermore, their actions are regarded as acceptable in the community since they have local trust (Ejaz & Khan, 2021; Ejaz et al., 2022a; Ejaz et al., 2022b). Therefore, civic society

provides a constructive resolution through legitimacy, ownership, and validity. Civil society has a crucial role in conflict prevention, promoting inclusive discourse, and establishing trust between divided groups, as well as in post-war reconstruction (Richmond & Mitchell, 2012). Pakistan, following 9/11, had disarmed some militants, but nothing has been done solidly to remove their radical mindset (Basit, 2015; Gill et al., 2020). Therefore, scholars suggested that there is a need for fresh and innovative approaches beyond the security paradigm. (Qazi, 2013). Scholars and international policymakers have recognized its work, but it has struggled with several challenges (Chowdhury, 2008). The available literature notes that its effectiveness in peace-building of the ethnic and religious conflicts has been compromised because of different barriers (ICG, 2011; Bano, 2012; Mirahmadi et al., 2012; Johnston et al., 2016). Generally, the literature depicts that there are three types of barriers that the CSOs of Pakistan are facing in the course of peace-building: the structural barriers, the process-related or procedural barriers, internal barriers, and international barriers. Many academics, however, concur that the structural factor is the primary reason, with the others being connected to it in one way or another (Iqbal et al., 2004; Sattar, 2011; Shaheen, 2012; Gordon, 2013; Ali & Qadri, 2016; Mehdi, 2018).

The state's ideological underpinnings, elite domination, and restricted legislative frameworks all provide serious structural obstacles to Pakistan's civil society. The narrow Islamic nationalism that shapes Pakistan's national identity, according to scholars, excluded religious and ethnic minorities and restricts the conversation about pluralism and minority rights, particularly under Zia-ul-Haq's rule (Jalal, 1995; Nasr, 2001; Waseem, 2011). The institutionalization of religious rigidity strengthened extremist organizations and restricted liberal democratic spaces by frequently portraying civil society efforts on gender equality, peace, and interfaith harmony as anti-Islamic (Siddiqui, 2011). Civil society actors, particularly those opposing prevailing power structures or promoting peace, are further marginalized by military and landed elites (Alvi, 1972; Siddiqua, 2007). Similar to other authoritarian environments such as Egypt, Iran, and Myanmar, the state suppresses rights-based or advocacy groups while favoring apolitical NGOs (Cavatorta, 2012; Paffenholz, 2010; ICG, 2011). Furthermore, restrictive policies, such as the 2015 INGO policy, have targeted politically sensitive organizations and reduced civic space (HRC, 2020). Dissidents are frequently branded as "anti-state" (Ejaz & Khan, 2021). These internal issues are a reflection of the worldwide trend of civil society becoming more securitized and civic space being delimited (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2012).

The current national and international literature principally emphasizes the transformative capacity of civil society in peace-building efforts. It also highlights that civil society faces systematic constraints due to structural barriers. Although some fragmented studies have identified the structural challenges confronting civil society in Pakistan, the existing literature largely lacks a comprehensive analysis. The negative implications of these structural constraints are insufficiently examined. The literature frequently characterizes these barriers as fixed or unyielding. An exploration of how civil society actors navigate, resist, or adapt to these constraints in the context of peace-building is notably absent. Existing scholarship predominantly emphasizes macro-level analyses, neglecting the lived experiences, strategies, and localized innovations of peace-oriented civil society groups functioning in hostile environments. This study aims to fill existing gaps by analyzing both the structural constraints and the agency, resilience, and tactical adaptations of civil society actors involved in peace-building in Pakistan. This effort seeks

to enhance academic discourse and inform policy discussions regarding the strengthening of civil society's role in conflict transformation, with attention to contextual factors.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Civil society is recognized as a vital contributor in peace-building, facilitating conflict resolution, promoting social cohesion, and fostering inclusive governance (Lederach, 1997; Leeuwen, 2008; Orjuela, 2008; Paffenholz, 2010). CSOs include a wide array of non-state actors such as NGOs, community groups, religious organizations, and social movements that function independently of the state (Paffenholz, 2010). CSOs can facilitate both negative peace, which involves the cessation of direct violence, and positive peace, which focuses on rectifying inequality and injustice (Galtung, 1969). Nonetheless, its peace-building function is influenced and frequently limited by structural obstacles, including exclusionary state ideologies, elite control of institutions, restrictive legal frameworks, and internal fragmentation (Belloni, 2001; Paffenholz, 2010; Richmond, 2011; Orjuela et al., 2017). These constraints restrict the autonomy, legitimacy, and capacity of civil society to achieve a lasting impact. In this sense, civil society is a contested and context-dependent space, where both internal dynamics and the broader political and institutional environment shape its peace-building potential.

This study's theoretical framework is based on interdisciplinary perspectives from political sociology, peace and conflict studies, and critical theory. This analysis utilizes concepts from conflict transformation theory, post-colonial state theory, critical civil society theory, and structural violence theory to examine how ideological, institutional, and socio-political structures in Pakistan impede effective civil society-led peace-building.

The central focus of this analysis is Johan Galtung's (1969) theory of structural violence. The systematic ways that societal structures, including political, legal, religious, economic, and cultural organizations, keep people or groups from reaching their full potential are referred to as structural violence. Galtung (1969) contends that justice, equity, and freedom are more essential components of peace than the simple absence of conflict. Violence takes the form of hardship, exclusion, and inequality rather than direct conflict when deeply ingrained mechanisms impede these conditions. Galtung's idea of structural violence clarifies how deeply ingrained injustices, such as repression, elite power consolidation, and ideological exclusion, pose significant challenges to effective peace-building initiatives of the local actors.

Another theoretical framework for understanding is the post-colonial theory. Key insights into the formation and nature of post-colonial governments can be drawn from the theoretical contributions of post-colonial scholars, such as Alvi (1972) and Edward Said. According to Alvi (1972), South Asian governments inherited a "bureaucratic-military oligarchy" from colonial control, which consists of institutions that stifle widespread involvement and support elite interests. These theorists draw attention to the ways that colonial legacies still influence state institutions and power structures, impeding democratic participation and bolstering structural inequality. It indicates the concentration of power, marginalization of the public, elite domination of institutions, and a legacy of authoritarian rule where civil society is an outsider to the state and is not a partner but a hostile element.

Furthermore, critical civil society theory provides a framework for comprehending the institutional and ideological limitations on civil spaces. According to Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony, dominant classes sustain their hold on power by generating ideological consent in addition to using coercion, which shapes public discourse to silence

critics. According to Habermas's (1989) theory of the public sphere, civil society is a forum for open and critical discussion in which people can hold the Government responsible. However, censorship, coercive state tactics, and surveillance undermine the integrity of this public realm in many situations.

These theoretical frameworks provide a thorough lens through which to view the systemic obstacles that Pakistani civic society must overcome. Galtung's concept of structural violence clarifies how systemic injustices, such as repression, elite dominance, and ideological exclusion, obstruct efforts at rebuilding. Through inherited tendencies of authoritarian governance, Pakistan's bureaucratic-military elite continues to exclude civic actors, as Alvi's analysis of post-colonial state construction demonstrates. Gramsci and Habermas' observations clarify how Pakistani civil society is intellectually delegitimized, frequently presented as "foreign-funded" or "anti-state," and how media control, legal limitations, and elite domination erode its ability to engage in reasoned public discourse. By combining these theories, the study can go beyond cursory observations and examine the systemic, long-standing barriers that keep civil society from being a powerful force in peace-building.

METHODOLOGY

To investigate the structural obstacles that impede civil society's contribution to peace-building in Pakistan, this study adopted a qualitative methodology and employed both descriptive and analytical approaches. Given the complexity of the subject's sociopolitical and ideological facets, a qualitative framework enables a thorough comprehension of the narratives, perceptions, and contextual elements that influence civil society's involvement.

Both primary and secondary sources were used in this research. A thorough analysis of the body of current scholarly literature, policy reports, government documents, and publications by both domestic and foreign NGOs was made to collect secondary data. Important background information, historical context, and institutional insights into the political, legal, and ideological frameworks influencing civil society were supplied by these sources. Personal observations and semi-structured interviews were used to collect primary data. Fifteen (15) in-depth interviews with academics, journalists, policy experts, activists, and civil society practitioners were undertaken. Purposive sampling was used to choose participants, guaranteeing their depth and relevance to the issues faced by Pakistani civil society. Each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted in either English or Urdu, depending on the interviewee's preference. All participants gave their informed consent. To obtain firsthand knowledge of the discursive and practical constraints that these actors encounter, the researcher conducted six (06) non-participant observations of civil society forums, events, and discussions. To record observations on language, participation dynamics, and patterns of interaction between the state and civil society, field notes were taken.

The six steps of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method, which include familiarization with the data, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and labelling themes, and creating the final report, were used to analyze the data. This approach made it possible to spot recurring themes and gain a deeper understanding of the structural elements that undermine peace-building initiatives, such as ideological dogmatism, elite domination, and civic marginalization. A cohesive and fact-based narrative was ensured by the integration of interview data and literature discoveries made possible by thematic analysis.

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

The fundamental power, political, economic, and social structures of the state are inextricably entwined with the structural obstacles to peace-building. The tendency for elites in conflict-prone areas to be unwilling to make room for others is widespread. As a result, people who speak are subjected to physical abuse, harassment, and blame for misconduct. Three categories of structural problems for advocacy, human rights, and peace-building CSOs in Pakistan are revealed by documentary reports and observations of the nation's political and social context.

POWER RELATIONS AND POLITICAL CULTURE

The Government of Pakistan has a lot of power over the affairs of society; therefore, it is challenging to develop the idea of tolerance without its cooperation and potential support. While the structure and manner of Government were semi-authoritarian during democratic eras, they remained more authoritarian and repressive during periods of martial law. The nature of the state has been described by Malik (1997) as "inherently centralized, denying participatory politics owing to its colonial nature." On a societal level, the minor oligarchs, such as *Malik* and *Sardar*, possess the same advantages and powers as the elites in the center. According to Ali and Qadri (2016), establishing a peace and advocacy CSO is a complex undertaking, since these organizations are always viewed as being against their interests. To them, advocacy NGOs encroach on their spheres of influence, and they are viewed as competitors of powerhouses.

According to Alagappa (2004), democracy is not necessary for CSO expansion. However, in the case of Pakistan, democracy has always aided in CSO growth (Weinbaum, 1996). Periodic dismissals of elected regimes have contaminated memory and given institutions little opportunity to adjust to the democratic ethos (Raza Rumi, personal communication, February 18, 2021). The centralization of power has resulted from the absence of a democratic atmosphere, and the authorities view CSOs as a threat to their unjustified power. (Sherafza Gujjar, personal communication, January 10, 2020). Since the peace, CSOs lack the authority, proper training, and domain to work for security and peace, the state believes they are not specialists in these areas. It has doubts about the campaigners' knowledge and efforts. As a result, it is always against their potential involvement in conflict areas (Zahid Shahab Ahmed, personal communication, October 20, 2020; Raza Rumi, personal communication, February 18, 2021;). According to Sattar (2011), the state views this sector as a competitive force that seeks to replace certain government functions. The absence of a democratic responsibility and power-sharing culture is squeezing the room for CSOs under an authoritarian culture (Farnood Alam, personal communication, February 25, 2021).

Another problem is the state's security. The state inherited the regional security dilemma on both the Eastern and Western borders from the beginning. The elites further strengthened it to safeguard themselves against the rising public demands for self-rule and welfare (Farnood Alam, personal communication, February 25, 2021). All of the political, economic, and social amplifications are now measured through the fundamental prism of security. This atmosphere harmed the social sectors, especially CSOs. According to Ali and Qadri (2016), the state has turned into a typical Third World state, with money being transferred from the social and developmental sectors to the non-developmental and security sectors. Additionally, the misappropriation of finances produced a situation where the goals of the average person could not be realized (Shaheen, 2012).

Delay is another problem for national NGOs. If peace and advocacy CSOs want to receive funding from INGOs for initiatives, they must always execute an agreement with the Federal Government of Pakistan. The approval procedure has slowed down too much in recent years. Since organizations must use the funding within a particular time frame, the available funds for the project in question typically expire (Mehdi, 2018). The Government does not justify delaying or rejecting INGOs' agreements (S. Gujjar, personal communication, January 10, 2020; Rida Khan, personal communication, January 10, 2020). The applicants of the project are informed that the Government is not required to abide by any regulations because engagement in Pakistan is a privilege bestowed by the Government rather than a right. Even if the agreements are approved, local government officials and intelligence agents could hinder the implementation of initiatives. They visit offices, review project paperwork, ask hostile questions, issue angry commands, and break privacy regulations without prior consent. The Government briefly prohibited two NGOs from hiring employees and operating in March 2016. Although nothing was found improper and they were permitted to continue operating, it hurt the organization's reputation (Shah, 2016).

The security of the activists is also a concern, as CSO employees, especially working in peace intervention organizations, are attacked, harassed, and sometimes killed for working with them. According to Gordon (2013), the communities' mistrust of CSOs, the security forces, and militants was the primary source of the threats. In this respect, the state offers minimal assistance. A significant portion of the nation, according to Shah (2016), has a "no-go area" for CSO operations. For example, in KPK, NGOs must obtain prior approval from the district administration before organizing even a short workshop or meeting. The situation has gotten so bad that it has been tough to do anything in South Punjab, FATA, Baluchistan, and some parts of KPK. The administration has labeled regional peace and human rights NGOs anti-state elements and is extremely antagonistic toward them. Pakistan banned several NGOs because they are linked to financing terrorism (Mehdi, 2018). The Government also claims that they are involved in security issues and acting against Pakistan's national interest (Zaman, 2020). Sattar (2011) remarked that many writers, activists, and intellectuals connected to CSOs were punished and imprisoned, and some were forced to live in self-exile.

OFFICIAL DOCTRINE AND SUPPORTERS

Jinnah, the founder of the nation, shortly after the creation of the country, took up his secular stance. In the freedom movement, religion was a political instrument that was employed to accomplish both political and economic goals. It was not the sole factor in creation (Aziz, 2015). According to Alvi (2002), General Sher Ali, a minister of General Yahya Khan's cabinet, made the statement that "Islamic ideology is Pakistan's ideology." Zulfikar Ali Bhutto used it for his "populism," while General Zia exploited it for "legitimacy." This religious ideology was spread through books and the media, while history was reconstructed and rewritten. Modern fundamentalists assert that since Pakistan was founded on Islamic principles, they should have the authority to determine the country's future. Each sect possesses its policy frameworks that fit its version of Islam (Hoodbhoy & Nayyar, 1985; Warraich, 2018). Islam also encourages moderation, justice, and tolerance, yet they only inflames violence and aggressiveness (Warraich, 2018).

Ideologically motivated identity is the core cause of the political unrest and growing radicalization of society, since it is constructed in a way that benefits the extremists. Many social and cultural elements were associated with the religion by theologians and certain

traditionalists, who also propagated enough hatred against modernism and the West to begin viewing them as “defenders of the ideology.” Liberal NGOs believe that the declared ideology is the root cause of violence, and their rejection of the national ideology of the theoretical state is the first step in the struggle. Moreover, it contradicts Jinnah’s address to the Constituent Assembly, in which he advocated for democracy, secularism, peace, and tolerance for the new state. The Campaigns of peace CSOs against violence, blasphemy laws, honor killings, minority rights, and violations of women’s rights created direct conflict with traditionalists and clerics who derive their political identities from these concerns. CSOs that provide services and rehabilitation, including psychosocial support, peace education, reproductive health, and child care, have also been targeted (F. Alam, personal communication, February 25, 2021; Mossarat Qadeem, personal communication, January 28, 2021; Shafqat Mehmood, personal communication, January 28, 2021; Amir Rana, personal communication, January 30, 2021).

Additionally, the madrassa is accused of provoking hatred toward other sects and inciting the suicide attacks. They contend that religious organizations are hesitant to denounce terrorist assaults against ordinary people (Sattar, 2011). The religious scholars interviewed by the investigator termed these views as mere propaganda (Moulana Mushtaq, personal communication, October 20, 2020; Moulana Muhammad Waseem, personal communication, October 20, 2020). The collection of charities that the religious establishment has claimed has caused tension between the local advocacy organizations and spiritual identities. According to Sattar (2011), religious organizations believe that NGOs seek to turn Pakistan into a secular state, which would reduce their position. According to Iqbal (2004), there has been an increasing hostility toward liberal CSOs, who are held accountable for obtaining foreign funding, endorsing Western ideals, and encouraging vulgarity. According to Moulana Mushtaq (personal conversation, October 20, 2020), they are groups that propagate anti-Islamic ideas and serve the interests of Jews who donate money to them.

The ideology has also been utilized for strategic interests. The establishment by itself raised concerns about the preservation of the ideological frontiers; consequently, it shaped an alliance between them and religious identities. The security institution protects the fundamentalists’ doctrinal interests, while the identities guard the security interests. The CSOs receive blatant retorts from the religious class if they complain about the security policy (Hoodbhoy & Nayyar, 1985; Sattar, 2011; Gordon, 2013). The local power elites, due to their mutual interests, also remain in touch with the religious and security establishments in their campaign against CSOs (Ashfaq, 2017).

THE REVERENCE FOR PEACE, CIVIC INVOLVEMENT, AND VOLUNTARISM

The respect for civic engagement and volunteerism significantly impacts the community’s participation in the peace-building program. Community cohesiveness, resilience, solidarity, and social transformation all depend on volunteerism. Except for the Ismailia community, which resides in Gilgit, volunteerism is in decline in Pakistan. Due to the inadequate educational system and lack of social training, the fundamental component of volunteering, “social responsibility,” is uncertain. The community is dispersed and chaotic. According to S. Jawad (personal communication, January 17, 2020) and S. Aziz (personal communication, January 12, 2021), volunteering is generally informal, and voluntary activities are unsystematic and disorganized. The dynamics of volunteers, particularly those about advocacy and peace, have a principal emphasis on short-term and insignificant issues, and issues that need broader consideration are overlooked (Jabran Nasir, personal

communication, January 10, 2021). Religious and traditional activism receive a lot of attention in volunteerism, whereas other facets of life are typically ignored (Raza Tanoli, personal communication, January 06, 2021). Although this excessive focus is a positive sign rather than a sign of debauchery, the elements that create conflicts take advantage of this situation. The state's media, textbooks, and broader narratives failed to include the liberal volunteers and their efforts. Although there is volunteerism, it is unsystematic and, from time to time, indirectly supports the violence. Weinbaum (1996) asserted that Pakistan's civic forces are relatively weak. The disregard for civic engagement is the other problem. The succeeding governments disregarded the potential and role in society. According to Hashmi (2013), the state's mainstream discourse does not mention the heroes of the CSO. It conveys the idea that civic activity is pointless and unproductive, and that civilians have done no admirable work. In CSOs, civic engagement and volunteerism are occupations that people outside of large cities conceal from the public because they are not regarded as respectable (Syed Khalid Raza Shah, personal communication, January 23, 2021). Because peace is not valued or respected, and peace campaigners are not respected, violence is the norm in Pakistan. The media, clerics, instructors, and schools are freely propagating hatred and intolerance. These organizations have grown so powerful that the Government can no longer control or oppose them. As a result, the culture of violence won out, and up until now, a culture of peace and respect for it has only existed in theory.

CONCLUSION

Pakistan is facing ethnic and religious conflicts that have fueled intolerance and fragmented national identity. The state's non-constructive narratives and responses intensify these divides. Ultimately, the society was polarized, and peace was hindered. Alternatively, the local actors, especially CSOs, emerged to bring about the positive peace, because of their local ownership and non-partisan role. However, even though hundreds of peace CSOs are working in the field, except for some short-term impacts, they are unable to challenge the system of violence. The study revealed that the primary cause of the failure was the disabling factors in the form of structural, internal, procedural, and international. However, structural barriers are potent and significant as compared to the rest, because one way or the other, the others are dependent on the structural hurdles. This study was an attempt to critically identify and examine the structural obstacles that CSOs face in their efforts to promote peace. Additionally, to assess the detrimental effects of these obstacles that undermine CSO autonomy and to make realistic, context-sensitive suggestions for changing the current system and establishing a supportive atmosphere for CSO peace activities.

A major structural impediment is Pakistan's political culture, shaped by decades of centralized governance, military dominance, and fragile democratic institutions. Civil society organizations (CSOs), especially those focused on peace functions such as monitoring, harmony, human rights, and advocacy, are often viewed with suspicion, labeled as foreign agents or anti-state actors. Bureaucratic hurdles, surveillance, and harassment by intelligence agencies create a hostile environment that severely limits their ability to operate. The ruling elites, both civil and military, resist empowering CSOs, perceiving them as a threat to their entrenched power structures. Ideologically, the state's redefinition of national identity along rigid religious lines, particularly since General Zia-ul-Haq's regime, has fostered intolerance toward pluralism and secular discourse. CSOs working for peace functions such as women's rights, religious minorities, and pluralism, and reform of discriminatory laws face legal constraints, societal backlash, and even

violence. These narratives portray progressive activism as anti-Islamic or influenced by the West, further alienating civil society actors from mainstream public support. Moreover, there is a notable lack of structured volunteerism and civic engagement. While informal, religiously motivated volunteer efforts exist, they seldom translate into long-term civic responsibility or support for community-based peace-building. Civil society actors are rarely recognized or celebrated in public discourse, resulting in social apathy and undermining their credibility and effectiveness at the grassroots level.

The state's security-centric governance model presents perhaps the most significant structural barrier. With national security defined mainly through a militarized lens, massive resources are funneled into defense at the expense of social sectors such as education, health, and community development areas essential for lasting peace. CSO activities are often curtailed under the pretext of national security, and laws intended to combat terrorism are misused to silence dissenting voices and suppress activism. These structural constraints collectively have a profoundly negative impact. They fragment civil society, limit its transformative potential, stifle dissent, and reduce public trust in peace-building initiatives. As a result, peace efforts remain reactive, disjointed, and vulnerable to both state repression and extremist violence.

To build a more enabling environment for civil society peace-building, several transformative steps are necessary. First, the state must recognize CSOs as partners in governance and development, not adversaries. Institutional frameworks should be developed to facilitate dialogue and collaboration between the state and civil society. Second, ideological narratives need to be reoriented toward inclusivity, tolerance, and pluralism, discouraging the weaponization of religion in politics. Third, civic education and purposeful volunteerism must be promoted to rebuild a culture of community responsibility and active citizenship. Unless these structural barriers are addressed holistically, Pakistan's civil society will continue to struggle under the weight of systemic repression and ideological rigidity. A peaceful and democratic Pakistan requires the full and free participation of civil society, empowered by both the state and society to drive meaningful, inclusive change.

This study was an endeavor to identify and analyze theoretically and empirically the structural barriers hindering CSOs' peace-building efforts in Pakistan. Nevertheless, because it primarily relies on secondary data, its conclusions are not unequivocally applicable to broader contexts. Similarly, it addresses some enigmas, but there are still many unanswered questions. These areas may include the international fragmentations and crises of CSOs as a barrier, the international barriers, and the procedural barriers in the way of peace-building. Furthermore, the enabling factors, the creation of peace constituencies, and the strategy of peace alliances can also be the burning topics.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, Z. S. (2012, July 27). *Pakistan: Peace-building in an impossible context?* Retrieved January 5, 2025, from Peaceinsight: <https://www.peaceinsight.org/>
- Akhtar, N. (2013). Ethnic politics in Pakistan. *Journal of Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies*, 5(3).
- Alagapp, M. (Ed.). (2004). *Civil society and political change in Asia: Expanding and contracting democratic space*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Ali, D. M., & Qadri, D. M. (2016). Growing role of civil society and mass mobilization in Pakistan. *Public Policy and Administration Research*, 6(2), 1-7.

- Alvi, H. (1972). The state in post-colonial societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh. *New Left Review*, 74, 59-81.
- Ashfaq, A. (2017, June 25). *The problem with NGOs*. Retrieved April 11, 2024, from The News: <https://www.thenews.com.pk>
- Aziz, K. K. (2015). *The making of Pakistan*. Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publishers.
- Bano, M. (2008). Contested claims: Public perceptions and the decision to join NGOs in Pakistan. *Journal of South Asian Development*, 3(1), 87-108.
- Bano, M. (2012). *The rational believer: Choices and decisions in the madrasas of Pakistan*. Cornell: Cornell University Press.
- Basit, A. (2015). Countering violent extremism: Evaluating Pakistan's counter-radicalization and deadicalization initiatives. *IPRI Journal*, 2, 44-68.
- Belloni, R. (2001). Civil society and peace-building in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Journal of Peace Research*, 38(2), 163-180.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Burton, J. W. (1987). *Resolving deep-rooted conflict: A handbook*. Lanham: University Press of America.
- Carothers, T., & Brechenmacher, S. (2012). *Closing space: Democracy and human rights support under fire*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Cavatorta, F. (2012). Arab spring: The role of civil society. *The International Spectator*, 47(1), 5-15.
- Chowdhury, A. (2008). Civil society and democracy in South Asia. *Contemporary South Asia*, 16(2), 167-180.
- Cordell, K., & Wolff, S. (Ed.). (2011). *Routledge Handbook of Ethnic Conflict..* New York: Routledge.
- Ejaz , M., Khan, D. A., & Iqbal, T. (2022). Civil society, gender and de-radicalization programs: A case of PAIMAN Alumni Trust. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 6(2), 492-502.
- Ejaz, M., & Khan, A. (2021). Civil society organizations and peace-building in Pakistan: A case study of role of Paiman Alumni Trust in identity conflicts. *Asian Journal of International Peace and Security (AJIPS)*, 5(2), 1-14.
- Ejaz, M., & Rehman, A. (2022). Exploration of the foundations of ethnic conflicts in Balochistan: A theoretical perspective. *Liberal Arts & Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)*, 6(1), 42-55.
- Ejaz, M., Hussain, R., & Iqbal, T. (2022). Think tank civil societies and peace-building of ethnic conflicts: An Analysis of the role of Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies. *Pak. Journal of International Affairs*, 5(2).
- Ejaz, M., Kalim, U., Swati, H. N., & Ahmed, W. (2024). Systemic conflict transformation approach to ethnic conflicts: A reflection from Balochistan, Pakistan. *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)*, 8(1), 151-176.
- Ejaz, M., Kalim, U., Shabbir, A., & Ahmed, W. (2023). The implications of the state's response to the violent ethnic conflicts in Balochistan. *Liberal Arts & Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)*, 155-171.
- Ejaz, M., Rizwan, M., & Swati, H. N. (2024). State responses to ethno-political and ethnoreligious conflicts in Pakistan: A comparison of military and democratic regimes (2001-2018). *Asian Journal of International Peace and Security (AJIPS)*, 8(3), 58-72.

- Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research. *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), 167-191.
- Gawerc, M. I. (2006). Peace-building: Theoretical and concrete perspectives. *Peace and Change*, 31(4), 435-478.
- Gill, A. S., Mustafa, G., & Rizwan, M. (2020). De-radicalization in Pakistan: Implications of Swat model. *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan*, 57(1), 366-381.
- Gordon, E. (2013). *Promoting participatory approaches to peace-building: A civil society needs assessment in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas*. London: SAFERWORLD.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. New York: International Publishers.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Haleem, I. (2003). Ethnic and sectarian violence and the propensity towards praetorianism in Pakistan. *Third World Quarterly*, 24(3), 463-477.
- Hashmi, A. S. (2013). Culture of violence versus culture of silence: Civil society responses to extremism and terrorism in South Asia. *Conflict and Peace Studies*, 5(1), 35-50.
- Hoodbhoy, P. A., & Nayyar, A. H. (1985). Rewriting the history of Pakistan. In A. Khan (Ed.), *Islam, Politics and the State: The Pakistan Experience* (pp. 164-177). London: Zed Books.
- HRCF. (2020). *State of human rights in 2019*. Retrieved from Human Rights Commission of Pakistan: <https://hrfp-web.org>
- Iqbal, M. A., Khan, H., & Javed, S. (2004). *Non-profit sector in Pakistan: Historical background*. Islamabad: Social Policy and Development Centre.
- Jalal, A. (1995). *Democracy and authoritarianism in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Johnston, D., Macdonnell, A., & Burbrid, H. (2016). *Countering violent religious extremism in Pakistan*. Washington: International Center for Religion and Diplomacy.
- Lederach, J. P. (1997). *Building peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies*. Washington: United States Institute of Peace.
- Leeuwen, M. (2008). *Partners in peace: Discourses and practices of civil-society peace-building*. The Hague: CIP-DATA KONINKLIJKE BIBLIOTHEEK.
- Majeed, G. (2010). Ethnicity and ethnic conflicts in Pakistan. *Journal of Political Studies*, 1(2), 51-63.
- Malik, I. H. (1997). *Malik, I. H. (1997). State and civil society in Pakistan: Politics of authority, ideology and ethnicity*. New York: St. Martin's Press Inc.
- Mehdi, T. (2018, November 17). *Why NGOs in Pakistan are at the brink of extinction*. Retrieved March. Retrieved May 12, 2024, from The Wire: <https://thewire.in/south-asia/why-ngos-in-pakistan-are-at-the-brink-of-extinction>.
- Mirahmadi, D. H., Farooq, M., & Ziad, W. (2012). *Pakistan's civil society: Alternative channels to countering violent extremism*. Washington: World Organization for Resource Development and Education.
- Mirahmadi, H., Ziad, W., Lamb, R. D., & Farooq, M. (2015). *Empowering Pakistan's Civil Society to counter global violent extremism*. Washington, DC: The Brookings.
- Nasr, S. V. (2001). *Islamic leviathan: Islam and the making of state power*. London: Oxford University Press.

- Oberschall, A. (2007). *Conflict and peace building in divided societies: Responses to ethnic violence*. New York: Routledge.
- Orjuela. (2008). *The identity politics of peace-building: Civil society in war-torn Sri Lanka*. Delhi: SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd.
- Orjuela, C., Paffenholz, T., Spruk, C., Belloni, R., & Kurtenbaach, S. (2017). Enabling and disabling factors for civil society peace-building. In T. Paffenholz (Ed.), *Civil society and peace-building: A critical assessment* (pp. 405-424). New Delhi: Viva Books.
- Paffenholz, T. (Ed.). (2010). *Civil society and peace-building: A critical assessment*. Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Qazi, S. H. (2013). *A War without bombs: Civil Society initiatives against radicalization in Pakistan*. Washington, D.C: Institute for Social Policy and Understanding.
- Rahman, T. (1996). *Language and politics in Pakistan*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Richmond , O. P., & Mitchell, A. (2012). *Hybrid forms of peace: From everyday agency to post-liberalism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Richmond, O. P. (2011). Critical agency, resistance and a post-colonial civil society. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 46(4), 419-440.
- Rupesinghe, K. (Ed.). (1995). *Conflict transformation*. New York: St. Martin's.
- Sattar, N. (2011). *Has civil society failed in Pakistan*. Karachi: Social Policy Development.
- Shah, Z. (2016, September 3). *Shrinking civic space in Pakistan*. Retrieved May 12, 2024, from Heinrich Boll Stiftung: <https://www.boell.de/en/2016/09/13/shrinking-civic-space-pakistan>
- Shaheen, A. (2012). Civil society, democratic governance and development. *Pakistan Perspectives*, 17(1), 63-107.
- Siddiq, A. (2007). *Military Inc*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.
- Warraich, D. S. (2018, April 13). *Religious militancy and ideology of Pakistan*. Retrieved April 14, 2024, from Daily Times: <https://dailytimes.com.pk/227291/religious-militancy-and-ideology-of-pakistan/>
- Waseem, M. (2011). *Patterns of conflict in Pakistan: Implications for policy*. Washington, DC: Saban Center, Brookings.
- Weinbaum, M. G. (1996). Civic culture and democracy in Pakistan. *Asian Survey*, 37(7), 639-654.