



Identity Politics and the Quest for Autonomy in South Asia (A Case Study of Balochistan)

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Abstract

With a focus on how military-backed, electable politics—particularly the emergence of the Baluchistan Awami Party (BAP)—have undermined provincial autonomy and silenced nationalist voices, this book examines the political marginalization of the Baloch ethnic group within the Pakistani federation. Because of the tribal Sardari system and colonial influence, Baluchistan’s political system has historically relied on elite patronage, which has limited the country’s ability to have true democratic representation. Federalist policies are still administered unevenly, particularly in municipal administration and resource distribution, notwithstanding constitutional pledges such as the 18th Amendment. Nationalist parties like the BNP-M and NP were displaced by election fraud when the BAP emerged in 2018, signaling a move towards centralized control. This has exacerbated ethnic concerns and further marginalized Baloch voices, while secessionist groups have gained momentum outside of electoral politics. The study uses a qualitative approach that blends critical discourse analysis, policy tracking, and historical analysis. Primary papers like accession treaties and constitutional texts are among the data sources, in addition to secondary literature from scholarly and non-governmental organisations. This study argues that genuine representation is still elusive in the face of centralized power and militarized government, placing Baluchistan’s marginalization within larger theories of elite capture, ethnic outbidding, and postcolonial federalism.

**Keywords:** Baloch Nationalism, BAP (Baluchistan Awami Party), Electoral Manipulation, Military Establishment, Provincial Autonomy, Ethnic Politics

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## INTRODUCTION

Economic disparities, historical grievances, and a desire for self-government are the main causes of the demand for autonomy among various identity groups. In places where individuals wish to emphasize their distinct identities in the face of national narratives, such as Kashmir, the Northeast region of India, and Baluchistan, this is particularly apparent. Baloch identity plays a big role in the struggle for independence. Strong cultural and ethnic ties among the Baloch people frequently conflict with the national identity that the Pakistani government espouses. The right to self-determination and the acknowledgement of their unique identity are promoted by Baloch nationalists.

Due to this, a number of militant and political organizations have emerged. One of the most divisive topics in Pakistan's political history is the 1947–1948 incorporation of Baluchistan. The case of Kalat, the largest and most independent Baloch principality, was characterized by ambiguity, opposition, and accusations of force, in contrast to other princely states who joined Pakistan. Baloch nationalists contend that political pressure and military threats were used to force the membership, despite Pakistan's official narrative portraying it as voluntary. Decades of strife, including recurrent insurgencies, official repression, and calls for increased autonomy or complete independence, have been stoked by this disagreement over the terms of Baluchistan's integration into Pakistan.

Baluchistan is systemically marginalized despite constitutional measures to address grievances, most notably through the 2010 18th Amendment, which gave provinces more authority. Despite having abundant natural resources, such as minerals, gas, and a strategically important coastline, the province is still Pakistan's most underdeveloped area. Instead of fostering prosperity, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has increased tensions because many see it as just another extractive project that benefits Punjab and the federal elite. In the meantime, military-backed rule, enforced disappearances, and the silence of nationalist voices continue to limit political representation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*Exploration of the foundations of ethnic conflicts in Baluchistan: a theoretical perspective* by Muhammad Ejaz and Abdur Rehman explains that Societal cohesion is seriously threatened by ethnic conflicts, which are frequently viewed as inevitable and are caused by the unequal distribution of needs, aspirations, and resources. Ethnic politics have always entailed factions vying for conflicting objectives, with conflicts ranging from mild disagreements to bloody civil wars. Ethnic tensions have existed in Pakistan's largest province, Baluchistan, since the country's founding. This region is home to a diverse Baloch ethnic movement, which includes groups calling for independence and others desiring more autonomy. Primordialism, which sees ethnic identity as fixed and based on past grievances, contributes to a strong sense of Baloch nationalism, which is why theoretical frameworks understanding Baloch ethnicity frequently fall short. Instrumentalism draws attention to the ways in which political leaders use ethnic identities to mobilize people. It emphasizes socioeconomic concerns such as resource exploitation and frames Baloch movements as reactions to the dominant Punjabi group's economic and political marginalization. Baloch ethnicity is reinforced by the state's attempts to enforce a single national identity in response to perceived threats, according to constructivism, which holds that ethnic identities are socially produced and subject to change. In addition to fostering a strong Baloch identity, this dynamic has led to ethnocentric views and the

exclusion of other communities, as well as disputes as a result of oppressive state policies (Ejaz & Rehman, 2022).

*The Dynamics of (Ethno) Nationalism and Federalism in Postcolonial Balochistan, Pakistan* by Manzoor Ahmed Sardars, or Baloch tribal leaders, have undermined Baluchistan's larger democratic goals by exploiting nationalist feelings and complaints against the government for their own gain. Pakistan's fragile relationship with the province, marked by centralization that breeds dissatisfaction and mistrust, is a result of its failure to uphold federal ideals. There are two primary schools of Baloch nationalism: radical nationalists who want secession and federalists who want autonomy within Pakistan's constitutional framework. Traditional chieftains of Baluchistan hold the real political sway, and they do so by receiving favours from the government. The Khanate of Kalat and the British colonial era are the origins of Baloch nationalism, which is influenced by historical, ethnic, and resource distribution issues. Since Baloch elites have been utilizing nationalist language to negotiate resource control and cement power, nationalism has arisen as a reaction to political misrepresentation and socioeconomic marginalization. Because local elites have frequently appropriated constitutional amendments intended to increase provincial autonomy, so sustaining a cycle of elite capture, Baluchistan's socioeconomic circumstances have not improved substantially. In the end, Baloch nationalism is a contemporary phenomenon influenced by historical, social, and economic elements; the province's enduring sense of nationalism and recurrent conflicts result from Pakistan's federal structure's inability to address the justifiable complaints of the Baloch people (Ahmed, 2020).

*BALUCHISTAN The State Versus the Nation* by Frederic Grare Within Pakistan's most marginalized region, the ongoing struggle in Baluchistan is a complicated interaction between official repression and ethnonationalist resistance. While historical grievances are rooted in economic exploitation of the region's natural resources and political exclusion, systematic military tactics such as extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and the use of proxy death squads have contributed to modern violence. In addition to encouraging sectarian violence against minority groups like the Hazara Shias, the state's dual strategy of violent suppression and forced Islamization through Deobandi madrassa networks has paradoxically bolstered separatist sentiments among an increasingly radicalized urban middle class. A cycle of insurrection and persecution has been sustained by ongoing electoral manipulation and governance shortcomings, even in the face of ostensible political remedies such as the 2009 Baluchistan Package. Although the Pakistani military establishment's ingrained counterinsurgency strategy still places more emphasis on coercion than reconciliation, recent research indicates that the conflict must be resolved through real power-sharing agreements, accountability for human rights abuses, and fair resource distribution. The case continues to be a crucial illustration of how state brutality turns movements for moderate autonomy into long-lasting insurgencies (Grare, 2013).

*Ethnic Identity, Nationalism and Governance in Pakistan* by Ali Murtaza and Laiba Imroze The explains that ethnic diversity of Pakistan, which includes Pashtuns, Baloch, Punjabis, Sindhis, and smaller groups, causes issues for governance and cultural richness as Islamic nationalism clashes with strong ethnic identities, especially when it comes to linguistic rules that prioritize Urdu over regional dialects. While economic inequities result in resource-rich areas like Baluchistan obtaining modest advantages, cultural exclusion restricts non-Urdu speakers' access to governance and education, and political under-

representation of smaller provinces endures despite decentralization efforts. These problems give rise to ethnic movements such as the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement and Baloch and Sindhi nationalism. Pakistan's centralized structure and military dominance impede progress, even when federal models propose power-sharing solutions. To address exclusion, inequality, and marginalization that undermine national unity, effective changes necessitate true decentralization, fair resource distribution, linguistic inclusiveness, and political discourse (Murtaza & Imroze, 2025).

*Territorial autonomy and ethnic conflict: the Baloch ethnic question post-18th Amendment by Rafiullah Kakar* Baluchistan's ambitions for autonomy have proven difficult for Pakistani federalism, especially since the 18th Amendment (2010), exposing conflicts between steadfast centralization and constitutional devolution. Although the amendment eliminated the concurrent list and raised provincial fiscal shares (7th NFC Award), there are still issues with how it was implemented: Baluchistan is not given fair gas royalties, the Council of Common Interests (CCI) hardly ever meets, and local governments lack financial autonomy. Opponents point to Islamabad's military meddling and unwillingness to relinquish control over resources (such as the Sui gas lease conflicts), which erode provincial administration through "electable" politicians and bureaucratic manipulation. Ethnic tensions have been exacerbated by the military's resistance to decentralization, which they see as a threat to national unity. This has fueled separatist groups and Baloch insurgencies. Conflict resolution is further weakened by the 18th Amendment's design defects, which include under-representation of Baloch in federal institutions and disregard for the reorganization of provincial boundaries. According to comparative studies, federalism fails in the absence of pluralistic power-sharing and democratic alignment. In Pakistan, Punjab's military predominance and influence continue to marginalize Baluchistan, making territorial autonomy useless. Resource inequality, military-centralist opposition, lax institutional enforcement, and ethnic under-representation are some of the main points of contention, highlighting the necessity of inclusive reforms and political reconciliation to stabilize Pakistan's shattered federalism (Kakar, 2024).

*Politics in Baluchistan: Nationalists, AIML, British and Congress, 1929-1947 by Kashif Iqbal* Baluchistan's political awakening (1929-1947) was characterized by conflicting nationalist, Muslim League, British, and Congress agendas, all of which influenced the region's difficult assimilation into Pakistan. Mir Abdul Aziz Kurd and Yusuf Aziz Magsi, two Baloch nationalists, promoted secular nationalism and envisioned an independent "Greater Baluchistan," while Jinnah's All India Muslim League (AIML) used constitutional reforms and Islamic unity to gain Baluchistan's accession and offset Congress's weak influence (Baloch, 1987; Sayed, 2008). By considering Baluchistan as a buffer zone against Russian expansion, strengthening tribal Sardars as middlemen, and ignoring socio-political development, British colonial policies left a legacy of exploitation that deepened tensions. Tensions over sovereignty, exacerbated by Pakistan's forcible annexation and unsolved frustrations over resource management, were brought to light by the independence of the Khan of Kalat (1947-1948) and nationalist resistance, exemplified by Mir Ghaus Bakhsh Bizenjo's rejection of religious nationalism. The AIML's success depended on organizing tribal elites, student organizations (like BMSF), and religious leaders. However, after 1947, Baluchistan's marginalization continued because of military meddling and centralized policies, which fueled long-lasting separatist movements. The ongoing conflict between Baloch autonomy and Pakistan's federal hegemony is



highlighted by nationalist secularism versus Islamic unity, British divide-and-rule strategies, AIML's strategic mobilization, and post-annexation estrangement (Iqbal, 2022).

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

What effects has political engineering had on Baluchistan nationalist representation and democratic legitimacy?

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In order to investigate how political engineering affects nationalist representation and democratic legitimacy in Baluchistan, the study compares the results of elections in 2013, 2018, and 2024, mostly using secondary sources such as election commission statistics, scholarly papers, media accounts, and publications from civil society. It looks at the rise of federalist parties supported by the establishment, such as BAP, PML-N, and PPP, the fall of nationalist parties like BNP-M, NP, and HDP, and the wider effects of voter disenfranchisement, elite co-optation, and election manipulation. Case studies of important constituencies, including as Awaran, Quetta, and Kech-Gwadar, show trends in patron-client politics and post-election rigging. The competition between federalist, secessionist, and nationalist narratives within Baloch identity politics is also captured by thematic analysis.

## **BALUCH NATIONALISM AND PROVINCIAL AUTONOMY IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

The largest but most marginalized province in Pakistan, Baluchistan, has a complicated history of postcolonial exclusion, colonial manipulation, and ethnic identity. The Baloch comprise roughly 3 percent of Pakistan's population and 56% of Baluchistan's, and because of ethnic and physical barriers, their kinship links extend into Iran but not Afghanistan. Baluchistan was a princely buffer state under British colonial control, with the Khan of Kalat holding nominal authority until the British instituted the Sandeman System, which gave Sardars (tribal chiefs) more authority at the expense of centralized tribal unity (Khoso, 2025). Baluchistan continues to be one of Pakistan's most undeveloped and neglected areas, despite its enormous geostrategic significance and abundant natural and mineral resource assets. The province, which makes up 43% of the nation's land but only houses 5% of its people, is home to a unique ethnolinguistic Baloch population that is arranged in a tribal structure governed by the exploitative Sardari system. The persistent violence in Balochistan stems from horizontal disparities in the political, social, and economic spheres and is motivated more by complaints than by greed. Deeply ingrained animosity and ongoing instability in the area have been exacerbated by ongoing exclusion from political involvement as well as neglect in sectors including jobs, healthcare, and education (Mushtaq & Mirza, 2022)

Through persistent political efforts by the All India Muslim League (AIML) and the strategic leadership of individuals such as Qazi Muhammad Isa and Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Baluchistan was incorporated into Pakistan. Leaders like the Agha Khan expressed early worries over Baluchistan's lack of representation in 1910, and Allama Iqbal's 1930 speech and Jinnah's 1929 Fourteen Points served to reaffirm those concerns. The foundation for political consciousness in the area was established by these initiatives. By establishing the Baluchistan section of the Muslim League and the Baluchistan Muslim Students Federation (BMSF) in 1939, Qazi Muhammad Isa was instrumental in rallying support. The BMSF played a crucial role in disseminating the League's philosophy and limiting the power of organizations like Anjuman-e-Watan that were affiliated with Congress.

Ghaus Bakhsh Bizenjo and Abdul Samad Achakzai, two nationalist leaders, opposed the Muslim League, but its alliance with tribal chiefs and religious leaders helped it gain more clout. Prominent tribal leaders backed the League by supporting the establishment of Pakistan and attending important meetings. All India Radio's March 1948 report that Kalat might join India exacerbated the situation, leading the Pakistani government to guarantee Baluchistan's accession. Despite the region's complicated political environment and conflicting nationalist narratives, the Muslim League's strategic partnerships, efficient mobilization, and clear vision made it possible for Baluchistan to be successfully incorporated into Pakistan (Iqbal, 2022).

Hereditary tribal elites were solidified, Baloch leadership was fractured, and a patron-client system of governance was established, which persisted after independence. Baluchistan remained under governmental control and surveillance after joining Pakistan in 1948, and questions of autonomy were repressed. Baloch identity was further weakened by the One Unit plan of 1955 until it was abandoned in 1970, the year Baluchistan was granted provincial status and conducted its first elections. Even though the province assembly now has 65 members, feudal elites still control the political system. Tribal influence is still present in areas like Sarawan and Jhalawan, but authority is transferred to sub-tribal players like Mirs and Waderas. Baloch political representation and resource control are still impacted by the colonial history of Sardari patronage, which has led to a strong suspicion of the federal government. A reflection of this history of exclusion is the rise of ideologically split Baloch factions, nationalists and federalists. Instead of resolving long-standing ethnic problems, the development of establishment-backed groups like the Balochistan Awami Party (BAP), which was founded without grassroots legitimacy, has further alienated the Baloch by bolstering federal rule (Khosro, 2025).

Baloch nationalist leaders contend that their ancient sovereignty under the Khanate of Kalat was undermined by the coerced and unconstitutional absorption of Baluchistan into Pakistan. They stress that the people of Baluchistan identified largely as Baloch rather than Muslims or Indians, and that the region was a separate, autonomous, and secular entity that was not represented at significant events like the Lahore Resolution. Pakistan's religious nationalism and British strategic interests forced Baluchistan to join despite the Khan of Kalat's 1947 declaration of independence; the Khan's parliament and nationalist leaders like Mir Ghaus Bakhsh Bizenjo opposed the decision. They believed that the union disregarded the Baloch people's will and right to self-determination and that using Islam as a rationale for merger was misguided and politically driven (Iqbal, 2022).

The province, which is abundant in natural resources, has long been the subject of complaints about their exploitation without providing the local population with just recompense or advantages. Baloch nationalists contend that because the earnings are seen as benefiting the central elite rather than the local population, the state's control over these resources has widened economic gaps and produced horizontal imbalances. The denial of political autonomy and economic marginalization are strongly related problems. Baloch aspirations for self-governance have been weakened over time by federal actions like the removal of elected provincial administrations, a lack of true representation in federal institutions, and rigging political procedures. Military actions, particularly in response to Baloch resistance activities, have enforced and worsened these political exclusions. Separatist sentiments have only been heightened by the use of force, such as during the military operations that followed the overthrow of the Baloch government in 1973 or the assassination of Akbar Bugti in 2006. Such operations have militarized the conflict rather

than resolved political complaints, further separating Baluchistan from mainstream political participation and escalating demands for further autonomy or perhaps independence (Mushtaq & Mirza, 2022).

Baluchistan's continued marginalization is a result of a complicated interplay between historical grievances, political exclusion, and economical neglect brought on by colonial exploitation and post-independence state policies. The province's integration into Pakistan was marked by coercion, contested legality, and the maintenance of tribal hierarchies under the Sandeman model and later government patronage. The people in the area have little political clout, live in poverty, and lack access to basic amenities despite the region's wealth of natural resources. Genuine nationalist and federalist voices have been marginalized as a result of attempts to control Baluchistan through politically engineered means supported by the central government, such as the establishment of the Baluchistan Awami Party. Instead of resolving fundamental issues, military actions and rigged elections have strengthened separatist sentiments and solidified the impression of occupation. Thus, a larger failure of state-building that prioritises control over inclusion is highlighted by the Baloch experience, further separating the province from the rest of the country.

## **THE RISE OF THE BALOCHISTAN AWAMI PARTY**

A major shift in Baluchistan's political landscape occurred in March 2018, when Saeed Ahmed Hashmi and a number of dissident PML-N and PML-Q members launched the Baluchistan Awami Party (BAP). Given its quick foundation, absence of a common ideology among its members, and composition of influential tribal leaders who frequently switched allegiances to maintain their positions of power, the BAP's rise was widely perceived as the result of political engineering by the Pakistani military establishment. In reality, the BAP maintains elite supremacy and centralized control, reflecting continuity rather than change, despite its public declarations that it supports federalist principles and rejects ethnic nationalism, which appeals to Pakistan's right-wing elements. The party lacks true democratic accountability and has always been linked to the interests of the tribal aristocracy and the bureaucracy. The BAP's operational role upholds the status quo, allowing the military to have influence over provincial politics while ignoring popular representation and democratic growth, despite rhetorical pledges to defend Baluchistan's rights (Akhter, Waheed, & Hussain, 2022).

Baluchistan's continuing reliance on establishment-led governance, centralized development planning, and shoddy constitutional reform implementation have all seriously weakened provincial autonomy. Large-scale initiatives like CPEC and Gwadar Port were started without adequate community input, which resulted in the eviction of native inhabitants and their exclusion from financial gains. Only 24% of Baluchistan's due gas royalties are paid, despite the country's abundance of natural resources. The difference is glaring: just 5–6% of the province's population has access to gas that is extracted from its own territory, and the federal government collects \$1.4 billion year after year from gas income, while the province only receives \$116 million. The local population's sense of exploitation and marginalization has grown as a result of these circumstances.

Furthermore, the promises made by the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, especially the devolution of authority to local governments as stipulated in Article 140-A, have not been substantially realized. There is still a lack of true grassroots empowerment and a concentration of administrative power at the federal and provincial levels. The province's capacity to implement autonomous, pro-autonomy policies has been constrained by the political leadership's frequent use of a clientelist system supported by

military and bureaucratic patronage. In important decisions, this approach marginalizes local views and upholds federal dominance. This contributes to the province's continued volatility and discontent by keeping it economically underdeveloped, politically marginalized, and increasingly cut off from the center (Ashraf & Shahzad, 2020).

Throughout Baluchistan's history, political parties have remained weak, dispersed, and reliant on the central government, failing to adequately represent the people's actual desires or guarantee sound governance. Tribal leaders and nationalist elites, like those from the National Awami Party (NAP), BNP-M, and JWP, have dominated Baluchistan's political scene from the country's 1970 declaration as a province. These groups initially opposed central authority but were ultimately marginalized through political engineering. The Sardari system, electoral manipulation, federal meddling, and inadequate internal institutions have all impeded the rise of people-centric leadership.

Reform efforts by the middle class, as those of Dr. Abdul Malik Baloch's government (2013–2015), were halted, and pro-center elites were brought back to preserve the status quo. The 2018 elections were a watershed because the newly established Baluchistan Awami Party (BAP), which has neither grassroots support nor historical roots, unexpectedly won the right to govern the province. Its rise, which many believe was the result of federal planning, carried on the top-down control tendency. Despite being in power, the BAP was unable to enhance governance, experienced internal strife, and eventually had to fire its own chief minister—more evidence of instability and patron-client politics. Baluchistan is now administratively chaotic and politically marginalized as a result of political parties' continued use as instruments of elite or federal interests rather than as platforms for democratic empowerment (Zareef, Hassan, & Jan, 2021).

The growth of the Baluchistan Awami Party (BAP) is indicative of Pakistan's military establishment's ongoing political engineering, which aims to keep Baluchistan under control through elite patronage rather than democratic processes. Since its formation in 2018 with no clear ideology or backing from the grassroots, BAP has been used to stifle ethno-nationalist sentiments and uphold federal authority. Notwithstanding its claims of progress, the party continued clientelist politics and centralized decision-making while failing to enact reforms or strengthen local government. In the meantime, local people have been left out of initiatives like CPEC, and resource distribution is still wildly uneven—only 5–6% of Baluchistan citizens have access to their own gas, despite the federal government receiving \$1.4 billion from it each year. The inability of models supported by the establishment to meet Baluchistan's long-standing demands for autonomy, equity, and representation has been highlighted by these dynamics, which have increased political marginalization and stoked disengaging.

A unique taxonomy—federalists, nationalists, and secessionists—emerges amid the continuous dispute about who in Pakistan's federation actually represents the Baloch, each of whom represents a different intellectual perspective on Baloch identity and government. Intra-ethnic struggle, especially ethnic outbidding, in which competing groups take increasingly extreme stances to establish dominance, is a contributing factor to the Baloch people's ongoing marginalization. Political contestation in Baluchistan takes place not only through parties but also through influential individuals, mostly tribal elites like Sardars, Nawabs, and Waderas, who have sway regardless of party affiliation. In Baluchistan, federalist parties like the PPP and PML-N, which have long dominated national politics, have historically had a small following. The situation was drastically changed, nonetheless, by the rise of the establishment-aligned Baluchistan Awami Party (BAP) shortly before the



2018 elections. The BAP took home 24 of the 65 provincial seats, compared to just one each for the PPP and PML-N. The PML-N won 18 seats and the PPP 16 in 2024 as a result of numerous electable leaving the BAP for these federal parties, indicating growing centralization. The electoral mandates of nationalist parties that support Baloch autonomy, such as the BNP-M and NP, have collapsed from 10 seats each to 1 and 0, respectively, due to allegations of electoral manipulation and exclusion from power-sharing. Secessionist organizations, on the other hand, advocate boycotts of elections and completely deny the legitimacy of the state, staying out of electoral politics.

Federalists, who frequently come from the same tribal elite as nationalists, are different in that they are unwaveringly devoted to the state and gain from political patronage and appointments. Some non-elite people also embrace federalist narratives as a means of aligning with states and achieving socioeconomic mobility. Together, these factors show how systematic electoral suppression, purposeful co-optation, and the colonial legacies of elite patronage continue to skew authentic Baloch representation in Pakistan (Khosro, 2025).

## **GENERAL ELECTIONS 2024**

Baluchistan's general elections in 2024 have exacerbated political disenchantment, especially among nationalist parties, as a result of several claims of manipulation and post-election rigging. While NP leader Dr. Abdul Malik Baloch, who was leading in NA-259 (Kech/Gwadar), was controversially defeated by Malik Shah Gorgaij, a non-resident with close ties to the establishment, whose son and son-in-law also secured seats in PB-44 (Quetta-7) and PB-40 (Hazara Town), respectively, prominent candidates like HDP chairman Abdul Khaliq Hazara and Qadir Ali Nayal were initially proclaimed winners but ultimately lost to lesser-known ones. Federalist groups like the PML-N and PPP won 10 and 11 provincial seats, respectively, while Baloch and Pashtun nationalist parties only won 3 seats in the National Assembly and 7 seats in the province assembly, a dramatic drop from 15 in 2018 and 20 in 2013. Widespread public disillusionment is highlighted by the low voter turnout of 41%, especially among young people who feel deceived despite taking the chance to vote under strict security and threats from militants. Nationalist parties, such as BNP-Mengal, PkMAP, NP, and HDP, have been pushed by this political marginalization—despite the general discontent with the previous five years of government—into an opposition coalition that seeks to contest the legitimacy of an electoral process they believe to be rigged rather than lead (Baloch, 2024).

In Baluchistan, where nationalist parties have been marginalized and federalist rule has been solidified under the pretense of democratic continuity, the 2024 elections highlight a growing problem of political legitimacy. A conscious effort to undermine Baloch political autonomy is indicated by the rise of the Baluchistan Awami Party (BAP) and its eventual demise, with its supporters joining establishment-favored federal parties like the PML-N and PPP. The decline of BNP-M, NP, and HDP electoral mandates and the emergence of establishment-affiliated politicians demonstrate how alternative Baloch voices are silenced through intra-ethnic rivalry, elite co-optation, and patron-client politics.

Indigenous representation has drastically declined, as evidenced by the data, which shows that nationalists lost 15 provincial seats in 2018 to just 7 in 2024 and only 3 members in the National Assembly. Post-election protests and low voter turnout (41%) are other indicators of public disenchantment, particularly among young people who feel deceived after putting their safety at risk to cast their ballots. In the meantime, secessionist organizations that completely boycott the process keep gaining support from disgruntled

citizens. All things considered, Baluchistan's electoral process continues to be more of a tool of central control than a representation of democratic will, protecting elite interests and further escalating the province's political and mental distance from the federation.

Baluchistan's nationalist representation and democratic legitimacy have been seriously weakened by political engineering. Dissident elites with close ties to the military and bureaucracy created the establishment-backed Baluchistan Awami Party (BAP) in 2018, which signaled a significant departure from grassroots nationalist organizations. In spite of claims of federalist administration, the BAP's reign upheld centralized authority and elite supremacy, excluding genuine local voices and preserving the status quo.

As demonstrated by the 2024 elections, where establishment-affiliated candidates, frequently non-residents of their constituencies, controversially defeated well-known nationalist leaders like Dr. Abdul Malik Baloch and HDP's Abdul Khaliq Hazara, electoral processes have been tainted by accusations of manipulation and rigging. Federalist parties like the PML-N and PPP gained ground in the National and Provincial Assemblies, while nationalist groups saw a sharp decrease in seats. Widespread disillusionment is reflected in the low voter turnout of 41%, particularly among young people who feel disenfranchised despite voting under tight security due to threats from militants.

This deliberate marginalization has increased mistrust between Islamabad and Baluchistan, diminished genuine political engagement, and undermined provincial autonomy. Democratic legitimacy deteriorates and political instability endures as nationalist parties are compelled to join opposition coalitions that challenge the validity of the election process rather than rule. Thus, in the complicated political environment of Baluchistan, political engineering has exacerbated persistent concerns and weakened true representation.

## CONCLUSION

A chronic crisis of representation, characterized by elite domination, federal manipulation, and the systematic marginalization of authentic nationalist voices, is reflected in Baluchistan's political trajectory. The emergence and decline of the Baluchistan Awami Party (BAP), the marginalization of ethno-nationalist parties in elections, and the growth of federalists with ties to the establishment highlight how political engineering has supplanted democratic plurality with networks of patrons and clients. The decline of nationalist electoral mandates and general public disenchantment, as demonstrated by low election turnout and a growing dependence on federally selected candidates, have widened the gulf between the Baloch people and the state. In addition to undermining the legitimacy of the voting process, these factors fuel the province's increasing political unrest and alienation. In this regard, the political landscape of Baluchistan undermines the prospect of significant self-governance by seeming more as a managed zone serving federal objectives than as a forum for democratic contestation.

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