

The Fragile Bridge: Motivations and Challenges of Non-State Actors in Conflict Management and Peace Building in Balochistan, Pakistan

Khalida Hira

Ph.d scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Sindh.
Email: Khalida.hira.s@gmail.com

Kamal Mustafa

Research scholar, Department of Political Science, University of Sindh.
Email: kamalsammoo@gmail.com

Moomal Manzoor

Research scholar, Department of Psychology, University of Sindh.
Email: Moomalsoomro26@gmail.com

Dr. Kiran Sami

Professor, Department of Political Science University of Sindh.

Received on: 03-01-2026

Accepted on: 05-02-2026

Abstract

This research identifies the motivations and challenges for non-state actors (tribal leaders, civil society organizations, and local mediators) in conflict management and peace building in Balochistan, Pakistan. The study examines the intricate role of non-state actors, such as tribal elders, civil society groups and local mediators in the protracted conflict in Balochistan, Pakistan. Given the trust gap of state led peace processes, this research explores the question of why and how these groups engage in the conflict, and the systematic obstacles they face in doing so, by using a qualitative approach based on the thematic analysis and the multi-track Diplomacy framework, this study uses content analysis to understand the motivations and challenges of local mediation efforts.

Keywords: Balochistan, Non-State Actors, Conflict Management, Peace building, Mediation

Introduction

The Balochistan crisis remains one of the most vexing and protracted issue for peace and stability in South Asia. Traditionally, state security narratives have dominated the discussion of this environment but an explorationist view reveals a secondary, often hidden, layer of activity led by non-state actors (NSAs). These players, encompassing tribal elders, local NGOs, and human rights organizations operate in the "mediation gap" - one that is not always

accessible to official channels of the state.

Given the security challenges in Balochistan, it is crucial to examine the traces left by these mediators in narrative to gain insight into their actions. This is an exploratory research, using qualitative content analysis to map the motivations and obstacles of non-state actors (NSAs) in contemporary reports, media reporting and policy papers. This approach offers a systematic "distant reading" of the peace building environment and helps to understand how these actors justify their efforts and the challenges they face in their efforts to reduce conflict. The main concern of this paper is two-fold: What are the thematic elements that drive the non-state actors to engage in risky mediation in a securitized environment? Second, what are the major operational and structural problems that they have described? This study aims to theoretically link tribal mechanisms with modern peace building theory, through the categorization of these elements via content analysis, to offer a holistic view of the non-state role in maintaining peace in Balochistan.

Literature review

Roles of Non-State Actors in Balochistan's Mediation Processes:

Non-state actors (NSAs) play critical roles in the mediation processes in Balochistan. These actors help with the issue of conflict resolution along with the government and international actors. The involvement of NSAs correlates with the literature on a Balochi traditional system of conflict management says Luqman (2021). The authors report that the disposition of vital systems in the Balochi society has historically served as a doorstep to inherent settlement of disagreements. Therefore, the tribal leaders, including the Sardars, the old advisor's council, and the traditional criers, have always been involved in sorting out clashes and family disagreements in Baloch societies. These traditions have been the epicentre of the resolution of disputes. According to R.Kakar (2022), the main reason is that the Sardars, or the tribal elder leaders, are powerful and experienced leaders and influencers who are always respected and listened to by older people, the youth, women, and the common Balochis.

Moreover, civil society organizations CSOs and grass-roots activists have a significant influence on mediation conflict resolution and building reconciliation in Balochistan. Mujahid (2022), reports that CSOs and well-wishers in Baluchistan, such as the help women organization and the women of the world human rights have historically been engaged in the fight against violation of human rights, social justice, and resolving disputes through domestic violence dialogues in settling disputes involving violence. This information is a clear indication of the roles of CSOs and grass-roots activists in the mediation and conflict resolution in Baluchistan. Furthermore, more religions, such as the Hindu and Sikhs, engage in peace-building of their communities in Baluchistan. The religious leaders mediate violence and mend the relationships between the two religious sects. Women's non-governmental organizations and NGOs have also engaged in community-building and peace-making in Baluchistan.

The Society For Human Advancement And Disadvantaged Empowerment (SHADE), Niyaad Foundation, Legends Society, Ahsas Development Organization, Today's Woman Organization TWO are some of the few women's NGO in Baluchistan located in Quetta that are involved in motivating women to engage in peace-making, community-building activities, and peace-building among communities via empowerment. These organizations effectively

help women to resolve conflicts in their community and builds community trust towards one another through re-orientation mediations on the traditional norms and cultures. It helps build reconciliation and nation-building.

Bridge-building:

In the volatile context of Baluchistan, civil society organizations play a significant role as mediators who successfully employ various techniques to facilitate communication and trust-building among conflicting parties. Specifically, a highly organized workshop or development of a neutral dialogue platform ensures better organization and stable development of communication among otherwise tense and distrustful parties. Ghafoor (2023) observes that one study of CSOs in Baluchistan underscores the importance of workshops. The workshops are simultaneously marked by the organization of a diverse group of stakeholders, including representatives of different ethnic backgrounds, political ideologies, and personal interests. They ensure a stable environment for open dialogue and clash of opinions, including the expression of each side's grievances and hopes for future cooperation. The request or conflict of statuses and interests is excluded from such a construction. Moreover, the regular encouragement of participants to cooperate and find common ground ensures each side's better understanding of their opponent. However, Ghafoor (2023) asserts that this is not the only tool to be employed by Balochistan's CSOs, as the construction of neutral dialogue Platform is also significant. Creating such neutral dialogue is critical as the CSOs ensure it is free from any partiality and ensure cooperation based on the notions of justice and fairness. Additionally, all parties must participate in each workshop or dialogue, and all elements of group identity must be considered a critical part of the dialogue. Such neutral dialogue is facilitated by building better levels of trust. The CSOs facilitate each participant-by-participant step to slowly develop better levels of trust to ensure stable future cooperation. Workshops and neutral platforms for dialogue are only one way of using the multi-pronged approach by CSOs in Balochistan, as researched by Bhatti and Shah (2022) has shown. Another is community-based initiatives aiming at reconciliation from the grassroots level, which involves local stakeholders and helps to build ties with the society. CSOs have worked at the community level to create trust and solidarity among local engagement networks. Hanif (2021) has referenced the use of modern technology as a communication and networking tool.

Dialogue and trust-building have contributed to the resolution of disputes and promotion of unity in the region of Baluchistan, known for its complicated socio-political and tribal systems. In the region, traditional leaders, who can typically be referred to as either Sardars or Maliks, are involved in resolving local conflicts and building trust between various groups. For example, the Jirga system is an assembly of elders and influential people that has been involving traditional leaders to facilitate the resolution of disputes and decision-making for centuries. Such systems of power have allowed disputing parties to freely voice their concerns, negotiate the terms of compromise, and restore peace in many cases involving land ownership, water rights, and resource allocations. Karim's (2022) research shows, a case is presented in which Sardar Ahmed mediated the talks between the two rival tribes in a rural area of the province of Baluchistan and helped implement the sharing of pasture lands and construction of a water veterinary service. The use of traditional leaders' influence and their

cultural authority to restore trust between the parties in conflict has been successful in lessening the tensions and promoting cooperation.

The trust-building efforts of traditional leaders in such instances of mediation have allowed establishing long-term outcomes of stability and unity in the region. The success of these leaders in addressing disputes which often involved violence and armed confrontations has developed through their on-going involvement in the communities and the reputation of credibility and loyalty that they have built. Yousaf (2019) identifies some of the mediation capacities of the influential Maliks in Baluchistan who were able to facilitate inter-tribal conflict resolution by restoring the trust between the sides and the continuation of social trust.

In Baluchistan, cultural rituals and ceremonies have also been used by traditional leaders as a platform for dialogue and trust building during the conflict. Being a source of national identity and a mode of expression of shared values, cultural events can play an important role in bringing people together. Recent research states that multi-day cultural festivals like Sibi Mela and Rakhshani Jirga give different tribes and ethnic groups an opportunity to mingle and renew the commitment to a common set of values and codes. Through the ritual life, the Baloch have managed to create a sense of unity and fellowship across groups, further facilitating the process of conflict resolution. The development of the region is yet another challenge that has been addressed in the process of mediation by external actors, i.e., the government and transnational corporations.

Challenges Faced by Non-State Actors in Balochistan:

Non-state actors in Baluchistan are facing a varied range of challenges that pose an obstacle to their efficacy in resolving conflict, providing humanitarian assistance, and governing. Because the security situation continues to be severe and prone to instability due to violence, insurgency, and militant attacks, the most notable challenge is that of security risks. Agha (2022) observes both violent and non-violent non-state actors, i.e. civil society organizations and humanitarian agencies, operate in high-risk areas where their personnel and activities are vulnerable to a range of threats from various armed groups and criminal networks. As a result, the lives and well-being of the personnel are at risk and the services and humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected populations can hardly be delivered.

The lack of institutional capacity is a considerable obstacle in its own sight whereas the shortage of available resources constitutes another serious issue for non-state actors in Balochistan. Ahmed (2021) reveals that most non-state actors in Balochistan, mainly civil society groups and community-based organizations, are relatively new to the concept of organized activism. As such, they are exposed to the difficulty of obtaining funds and required technical and logistical support to sustain their activities and develop and implement action and advocacy programs. The lack of formally established procedures for the accreditation and regulation of non-state actors alongside informal approaches to these issues may also create difficulties to the extent that no recognition by various public and civil stakeholders is present.

As far as conflict resolution and peace building are concerned, one of the main problems is that of legitimacy, representation, and inclusivity. Non-state actors are commonly considered to be quite influential in the communities they operate in, but everybody is contesting the

legitimacy of the other within the same faction while only a fraction of the voiceless and the downtrodden can be heard. Kareemi (2019) argues that the existing intra-group schisms lead to serious difficulties in peace building since they provide the authorities with more opportunities to play the non-state actors against each other than to give unity, coordinated response, and negotiation stance which is often necessary for them. The other issues facing non-state actors in Balochistan include lack of space for civil society and dissent in a highly securitized environment coupled with politicized aid and humanitarian assistance.

Methodology

This study will use qualitative methodology. The researcher will rely on secondary data embedded in academic literature on political policy and conflict management on the role played by non-state actors in managing conflict and building peace. Qualitative methodology is the most suitable for this research due to its high ability to explore deeply the phenomenon of non-state actors' involvement in the management of conflicts. Compared to quantitative methodology, where most research data are rooted in numbers and statistical calculations, qualitative methodology makes it possible to receive a holistic understanding of all the complexity of the processes in conflict management (Busetto *et al.*, 2020).

Using qualitative methodology gives researchers an opportunity to study in detail the issues related to a conflict, its actors, and conditions where it develops. It is possible to learn more about people's experiences, feelings, and interactions in case of a conflict. Therefore, this work can be based on interviews, observations, and case studies that were done in past and will talk much about non-state actors' reasoning, motivations, explanations, and logic about a certain conflict. However, besides this visible part of applying non-state actors to manage conflicts, qualitative methodology makes it possible to explore some hidden social, cultural, and political influences of the problem. The issues that may not be too visible become clear if a researcher uses a qualitative approach to study the fields of policy and conflict management (Mohajan, 2018).

Results and discussion

That literature keeps stressing that, for years, tribal leaders and age-old dispute practices have effectively handled conflicts in Balochistan. Baloch & Yousaf (2024) point out that because traditional institutions are so connected to local customs, they usually enjoy an authority and acceptance that institutions of the state may not have. Such a connection to tradition turns into real authority, as tribal elders are generally respected and used to settle disagreements by applying rules everyone agrees are fair. Because they receive such trust, their choices and guidance are typically approved by the disputing partners, seldom requiring the intervention of formal state steps. This result is similar to what have been found in this study which described tribal elders as major mediators and persons most often asked to solve conflicts in their communities.

Ullah & Ejaz (2024) add that jirgas are gatherings where people involved in a problem come to an agreement via negotiations. Rather than relying on official legal rulings, jirgas use customs of collective decision-making which depend on conversation and dialogue that people in that region recognize. This approach helps ensure that members of the community feel a part of solving the problem which protects social unity in an area where people are

largely connected by tribe and kinship. The authors point out that jirgas deal with both current conflicts and maintain peace by preventing the community from splitting apart. Karim (2022) points out that there are new problems for traditional mediation systems, mainly because tribal leaders are marginalized politically and lack official state recognition. Because of this marginalization, tribal elders become less trusted as mediators which cause problems between old and new styles of authority. The lack of no organizations or laws backing traditional practices, their effectiveness reduces and people become suspicious or fight each other when state officials or politicians are involved in local issues. In this study, it is founded that tribal members stressed how certain issues make it hard for their system to be both trusted and actually work. Having tribal authority gradually undermined could cause important conflict resolution systems to break down and destabilize the communities they were meant to sustain.

Local mediation supervised by tribal leaders and jirgas is still the main method of settling disputes in Balochistan since it is recognized, people are involved and most agree with it. Still, these tools struggle with political exclusion and a poor official infrastructure which puts their effectiveness in conflict mediation at risk. Achieving balanced mediation means respecting local heritage and also applying important government policies that strengthen their authority and help them survive.

In Balochistan, important roles in the peace process are now played by NGOs and civil society organizations which support traditional solutions and meet gaps not covered by formal conflict resolution groups. Rashid (2019) and Habib & Saeed (2020) thoroughly explain how NGOs have transformed life in these areas by teaching new methods of structuring communities, promoting dialogue and offering education for peace. As a result, mediation projects inform mediators with specialist skills in resolving conflicts that may be missing in the region's usual ways of handling disputes. By making mediation more professional, this help ensure that peace processes are clearer and better planned which supports reducing conflicts and peace building in the community.

Conclusion

The mediation environment of Balochistan is a fragile yet crucial hybrid ecosystem in which traditional tribal processes and modern civil society processes fill the important gap left by official state led peace-building processes. Tribal leaders are primarily motivated by the need to preserve their social and cultural legitimacy, while grassroots NGOs are primarily motivated by humanitarian concerns. Yet each group is plagued with problems such as increased security, a lack of recognition and resources. In short, the peace in this region will not be sustainable unless it adopts a more hybrid peace-building approach that officially acknowledges local traditional mediation, and provides these significant non-state actors with security and technical assistance to be effective and independent.

References

1. Agha, S. (2022). CONFLICTS IN PAKISTAN–THE NEED FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE. *Revista Romana de Sociologie*.
 2. Ahmad, S. M. (2021). Clearing misconceptions about civil society in Pakistan. In *Re-Interrogating Civil Society in South Asia* (pp. 56-71): Routledge India.
 3. Bhatti, M. R., & Shah, A. S. (2022). Countering Violent Extremism and Combating Models in
-

- Pakistan. *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, 3(4), 208-220.
4. Busetto, L., Wick, W., & Gumbinger, C. (2020). How to use and assess qualitative research methods. *Neurological Research and practice*, 2(1), 14.
 5. Ghafoor, S. A., Baloch, M. A., & Murtaza, G. (2023). Socio-Cultural Challenges to Women's Political Participation in Makran, Balochistan. *Journal of Quranic and Social Studies*, 3(2), 24-36.
 6. Hanif, A., Sharma, R., & Ichii, R. (2021). Resolving CPEC issues in balochistan through local government. In *Partnerships for the Goals* (pp. 1022-1032): Springer.
 7. Kakar, R., Saleem, M., & Sarwar, B. (2022). The Political Economy of School Education in Post-18th Amendment Balochistan. *Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, Islamabad*.
 8. Kalin, M. (2019). *Three Experimental Studies on Reducing Religious Prejudice in the Islamic World*: Yale University.
 9. Kareemi, A. Q. K. (2019). *The Baloch Movement: a Study of Ethno-nationalist Conflict*. Carleton University,
 10. Karim, M. A. (2022). *Governance and conflict in Pakistan: Developing a Conflict Prevention and Reduction (CPR) model to promote peace in Baluchistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA)*. The University of Waikato,
 11. Luqman, M., Ashraf, S., Shahbaz, B., Butt, T. M., & Saqib, R. (2021). Rural development through non-state actors in highlands of Pakistan. *Sage open*, 11(2), 21582440211007126.
 12. Mohajan, H. K. (2018). Qualitative research methodology in social sciences and related subjects. *Journal of economic development, environment and people*, 7(1), 23-48.
 13. Mujahid, I. (2022). Balochistan and CPEC: Analyzing the Indian Factor. *BTTN Journal*, 1(1), 51-67.
 14. Yousaf, F. (2019). Tribes and Intrastate Conflict.
-
-