

## **Ethnic Fragmentation and Dynamics of Politics in Pakistan**

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### **Abstract**

*The state is a resource in itself and does needful to distribute the resources. In a multi-ethnic state, it is most important to analyze how resources and state power are shared among different ethnic groups. It is also most important to assess how state power is used to facilitate one or more ethnic groups at the cost of others and to enlist the repercussions what the state faces. Pakistan is a multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural state emerged over the map of the world in the name of Islam. After twenty-three years, the electoral outcome of the first general election sharpened the ethno-regional differences between the two wings and Bangladesh emerged on the map of the world as an independent state. The complex nature of socio-economic and political factors re-shaped the interaction between lingual cum regional ethnicity and electro-political dynamics in Pakistan. The prevailing ethnic landscape requires a wholesome review to accommodate all the ethnic groups and identities in state power and resources. This paper will explain how different ethnic groups in Pakistan had been politicized, institutionalized and promoted for particular gains by the ruling elites during democratic and military regimes. The study will also examine either the prevailing electoral and political system is useful to diffuse the prevailing polarization among different lingo-regional ethnic groups or not. The paper is an attempt to explore the causes of deepening ethnic fragmentation in Pakistan and suggest a viable framework to marginalize these differences through an electoral and political mechanism.*

**Key Words:** *Fragmentation, Ethno-nationalism, Regionalism, Electoral Politics,*

### **1. Introduction:**

Stratification and diversification have become the social fabric of a society and the state. This phenomenon has been studied by different scholars in different ways availing varieties of tools and methodologies. David termed ethnicity as “minority, group, race, caste, class, and inner and outer group” (Peter, 1991). However, some analyzed the phenomenon of ethnicity in terms of insiders and outsiders, the others, nationalities, aboriginals and immigrants (Marvin, 1984). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the efforts of nation building succeeded and the European states had become the mono-national states (Parmatma, 1980). The end of the second world war engraved new identities over the map of the

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world assembled over ethnic cum nationalist interests. Most of the countries which succeeded to get independence from the colonial empires have to face the problems of ethnicity in one or more contexts (Eriksen, 1990). History witnessed many cases in which the ethnic contentions resulted in severe violence. After the disintegration of USSR and Cold War, Hall opined, “various centrifugal forces based upon ethnicity, regionalism, sectarianism, etc. have manifested themselves as a substitute, for the ideology-based style of politics. Ethnicity, in particular, has sprung up as a most pronounced political phenomenon in the post-communist world. The South Asian region is also no exception in this regard” (Hall, 1979). Ethnic, religious, regional and linguistic based contentions used to be seen in western democracies and the socialist states of Europe. All these identities struggled to achieve their settled goals and availed all the resources in this regard (Ahmed, 1991).

Despite the countless accomplishments which the socialist and secular democratic political systems had credited, these systems did not succeed to settle down the longstanding issues of ethno-nationalism. In third world countries, these problems have become more severe and violent. These forces or groups used all tactics to gain maximum autonomy under the existing political framework or a separate and independent state (Inayatullah, 1997). Sri Lanka had to face the Sinhalese Tamils’ issue which once had challenged her integrity (Seavaratnam, 1989). India has been facing a number of such movements, including Mezzo and Naga. All these ethnic-nationalist identities have been struggling for their separate homeland (Ahmed, 2000). Uneven development, lingual dichotomy and, political and economic imbalances proved to be disintegrating forces for Pakistan in 1971 when Bangladesh emerged as an independent state over the map of the world. At present, a number of centrifugal forces have been operating in Pakistan and demanding more autonomy within the present political framework or separate homeland.

## **2. Factors Sponsoring to Ethnicity**

### **2.1. Sovereignty:**

Sovereignty in terms of maximum autonomy or independent state has become the major source of ethnic confrontation. Dominated ethnic groups alleged that ruling elite did nothing to accommodate the desires and demands, in the context of Pakistan, politically and constitutionally. Ahmad argued, “demand for complete independence, confederation with limited residual powers for the center, greater autonomy within the federal structure, creation of new provinces for the groups not having their own province, and altering the

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provincial boundaries to create ethnically more homogeneous provinces have been voiced from time to time. Lately, the demand for holding local elections and giving more power to local governments, especially in urban Sindh, has been added to the arsenal of ethnic demands” (Ahmed F., 2000).

### **2.2. Economic Disparities:**

In a heterogeneous society, economic imbalances and disparities fuel up the ethnic fragmentation and divide. When the state fails to disburse its duties in a judicial manner for the various groups and does not succeed to protect the rights and liberties of individuals, a trust deficit widens between the state institutions and masses. Moreover, socio-economic injustice leads towards the exclusion and intensifies the ethnic divide. When the designed state’s policies cause exclusion of ethnic group(s) from mainstream politics, the situation becomes more intensive and vulnerable. If there are no remedial measures, the isolation intensifies the ethnic conflicts and sometimes leads towards the violent movement. Therefore socio-economic injustice has become one of the most influencing factors which fuel up the alienation and deprivation feelings among the marginalized ethnic groups and ethnic divide becomes more. “This severe sense of alienation generates conflicts and issues in the society and leads to the demand for political autonomy” more worst” (Shehzad, 2011).

In short, uneven development and economic disparities lead to social bifurcation and societal fragmentation. Yiftachel believes, “in heterogeneous societies, the unfair distribution of state resources hatch ethnic conflicts, and causes the marginalized ethnic groups to protest for the protection of their regional economic interests. They claim that they are entitled to maximize their economic benefits from national resources. They also demand autonomy to achieve their group interests. On the other hand, the dominant groups develop a feeling of satisfaction and perceive the state structure to be congruent” (Yiftachel, 1997).

### **2.3. Allocation of Resources:**

Ahmed believes that the unjust allocation of state resources among all the federating units and identities is one the most influencing factors which crystallize the ethnic divide. “These resources include financial resources, recurrent expenditure, the share of irrigation water, Government Jobs, opportunities for professional and higher education (location of institutions and admission policies), allotment of agricultural lands in Sindh and Balochistan to military officers and civil bureaucrats” (Ahmad, 2000).

**2.4. Demographic Factor:**

Large scale Inter-provincial migration fuels up ethnic conflicts and stimulates the problem of assimilation. High magnitude migration smashes the limited resources and adversely affects the demographic balance. These changes sharpen the ethnic divide, resultantly; conflicts between local people and settlers erupt. Eriksen states, "When migrants come into contact with people of a distinct culture, traditions and identities, both the groups (migrants and locals) endeavor to retain their hold in the power structure of the state. This situation leads towards ethnic discrepancies in most developing heterogeneous societies"(Eriksen T. H., 1993).

**2.5. Political Factors:**

The state is a resource in itself and does needful to distribute the resources to all the identities on an equal basis. If the state operating system fails to provide equal opportunities to all its identities and does not succeed to engage them in mainstream politics then political turbulence ensues. The grim situation facilitates the ethnic groups to identify themselves on the basis of their respective region. Availing the deprived sentiments, the elites mobilize the followers for political gain, reshape their identities and, sometimes, and form new ethnic groups and nations (Shehzad, 2011). Sometimes, strong assimilationist policies develop the feelings of exclusiveness among minor groups. Resultantly, resistance emerges from those ethnic groups which want to maintain their identities. Shehzad is of the opinion, "in multi-ethnic states, ethnic groups may also endeavor to seek more political power to protect their political and economic interests. Sometimes, smaller ethnic groups feel that their socio-cultural identities are being merged into state-centric national identities because of fewer opportunities in the state structure. This shapes their disposition towards the polity. They perceive themselves to be alienated from the overall political process and state institutions and become more indifferent towards the polity. Consequently, the socio-cultural identities of these groups provide the basis for political mobilization. It becomes a serious threat to national solidarity and creates the problem of social divisiveness. It also impedes the path to national integration, resulting in ethnic conflict" (Ibid).

**2.6. Language and Culture:**

Cultural symbols serve as instruments for group cohesion and legitimating group demands. Cultural heritage's protection remains the constant feature of the struggle for ethnic identities' assertion. In the multi-ethnic and multilingual state, all the identities struggle to protect and promote their culture and language. If the state fails to protect the regional heritage then a sense of

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deprivation develop among the minor identities, resultantly, ethnic divide sharpens and conflicts emerge.

### **2.7. External Factors:**

External influences can also generate ethnic conflicts. External actors, politically and financially, support specific groups to promote their ideologies, influence the polity of the state and achieve their targets. "History is full of examples of countries with outside interests, and cases of interference in the ethnic issues of other countries. In the post-World War I period, several treaties were signed between states regarding the protection of each other's national minorities. The League of Nations guaranteed the protection of minorities, but it was not successful. A number of bilateral treaties were signed between states on the treatment of national, religious and linguistic minorities during the period between World War I and II" (Stavenhagen, 1998).

### **3. Theoretical Framework:**

"A group with a common cultural tradition and a sense of identity which exists as a subgroup of a large society is called ethnic group. The members of an ethnic group differ with regard to certain cultural characteristics from the other members of their society" (Theodorson, 1969). Connor states that "the ethnic group may evolve a structural identity by developing a particular type of "joint" relation, differing from the way others organize their "social role" (Connor, 1972).

Anthropologists describe ethnic as: "A group possessing some degree of coherence and solidarity composed of people which are, or at least latently, aware of having common origin and interests" (Imtiaz Ahmed, 2000). According to Cambridge Encyclopedia:

"It is a group of individuals identified on the basis of race, color, language and territory" (Cashmore, 1988).

"An ethnic group is a self-perceived inclusion those who hold in common a set of traditions not shared by others with when they are in contact. Such traditions typically include folk, religious belief and practices, language, a sense of historical continuity and common ancestry or place of origin" (Crystal, 1991). However, the Encyclopedia Britannica described the ethnic group in the much more elaborative way:

"A social group or category of the population that in a larger society is set apart and bound together by common ties of race, language, nationality or

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culture is called ethnic group. As a general case, at the core of ethnic identification are what have been termed as primordial affinities and attachments derived from the place of birth, kinship relationship, religion, language, and social practices that come naturally to an individual to attach himself to other individuals from the same background. These attachments remain in the unconscious and can be rekindled by appropriate stimuli" (Ahmed F., 1984).

Riggs is of the opinion that all ethnic groups attribute distinctive culture, language and social traits which commonly differentiate and distinguish each from other similar groups (Riggs, 1985).

"One can define that ethnicity is a group of individuals living side by side, but not intermingling with each other. These people grouped together on the basis of territory, professions, languages, geography without conflicting with each other until and unless they are triggered to do so. Ethnicity itself is not harmful to the existence of any state. The intensity of different variables creates a contradictory point of view and hostile environment within the territory of any state" (Majeed, 2000).

In context with the origin and continuation of the ethnicity, there are two schools of thought, Primordialists, and instrumentalists. Primordialists argue that ethnicity is based on the culture and ingrained in human nature. On the other hand, instrumentalists believe that ethnicity is socially constructed and elites of the group construct ethnic identities (Young, 1985). However, the majority of the scholars believe that ethnicity has both objective and subjective dimensions and in various situations, their importance can never be marginalized.

In the pages of the history, the struggle for Pakistan is a unique historical experience. It excelled all ethnic, linguistic, cultural and regional differences and merged into a powerful movement culminating in the creation of Pakistan. It even challenged the geographic compulsion. However, after its creation, "Pakistan has become a multi-ethnic, polarized and fragmented state. Majeed is opined that since 1947, the society and the state of Pakistan have been caught in the whirlpool of divergent cross-cutting social political fiber. The country is fraught with multifarious problems of crucial and intricate nature, but ethnicity has emerged as the most significant and delicate issue" (Majeed, 2000). Commenting on how the state which emerged on the map of the world through a popular movement and all the forces put aside all their differences, had become the whirlpool of socio-regional, linguistic and racial conflicts, Aslam says, "the dilemma before Pakistan has been to create a national

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identity out of diverse regional and linguistic loyalties". He believed that "for Pakistan integrity, ideology was the best unifying force. Unfortunately, socio-regional, linguistic and racial realities began surfacing and ideological hegemony was being eroded. Therefore, ethnic identities emerged in 1948" (Aslam, 1995).

Although numerous factors were involved in the development of Bengali ethnic consciousness, however, during the course of first constitution making, communication source had become one of the main conflicts between two wings. The central government did not succeed to address the issue in a harmonious manner and Bengali students' movement to declare Bengali language as the national language was handled through coercive measures. That was the beginning of the conflict and complex. The managers at the center either did not realize the intensity of the situation or otherwise, they did not want to space the Bengali's sentiments a weightage to develop the state policies (Akhtar, 2013). Moreover, the economic policies and disparities provide more fuel to the Bengali's nationalism. The results of the first provincial election 1954, was the clear message to the central government that political forces and the masses of the Eastern wing did not like over centralized policies. The United Front, overwhelmingly, succeeded to oust the "name" and the "image" of Pakistan Muslim League. The demand of provincial autonomy forced the central government to dismiss the provincial government, imposed Governor's rule and banned the Communist Party. "The dismissal caused further resentment amongst the Bengali population and Communist Party" (Sayeed, 1966). Moreover, parity between both the wings became an issue of great concern for Bengalis. They realized that all these moves are being made to contain their majority and they were being treated as "colony". Uneven development, over centralized management and policies, unmerited distribution of resources, controversial parity formula, unsettled issue of means of communication and the marginalized induction in the central administration were the factors which developed and promoted ethnic nationalism among the people of the western wing. Lastly, the results of election 1970 showed the unbridgeable gap between two wings, which culminated to civil war and successful secession (Akhtar, 2013).

### **4. Baloch Ethno-nationalism:**

Balochistan is the largest province of Pakistan with respect to the geographic division; however, its population is only 5.1 percent of the total population of the Pakistan. Ethnically and politically, it is highly fragmented. Over the last sixty years, the center-province relationship had witnessed many ups and downs.

**4.1. Accession of Kalat:**

Partition plan 1947 powered Shai Jirga to decide the fate of Balochistan, either to be the part of Pakistan or India. Shai Jirga decided to accede to Pakistan. However, the khan of Kalat, ruler of princely states, declared independence. The then government of the Pakistan considered this declaration against the spirit of the partition plan and further it would pose the serious threat to the integrity of the state. In April 1948, central government sent a battalion of armed force to sign an accession document.

**4.2. Allotment of Land**

In 1958-59, the central government decided to allot agricultural land to the Punjabi settlers near the Sindh border. The allotted land was planned to be irrigated through Pat Feeder Canal. The local population felt that central government was trying to deprive them of their resources. Local tribes resisted these moves and resultantly, clashes triggered. Later on, the issue resolved when the central government decided to allot the land to the local tribes.

**4.3. Dissolution of First Elected Balochistan Government:**

In 1973, Bhutto led central government dismissed the first elected Balochistan government and imposed Governor's rule. The then central government alleged that the provincial government was violating the constitution and raising Baloch armies to secede from Pakistan. The dismissal outraged the Balochis and they started a guerrilla war. Hassan is opined, "Bhutto's decision to deploy army in Balochistan was his political mistake. It affected the country's direction in many ways and provincialism assumed new dimensions" (Akhtar, 2013). Later on, when the Bhutto government was toppled by Zia Ul Haq, the then army chief, the military regime granted amnesty to Baloch guerrillas, allocated funds for their settlement and released thousands of prisoners. The military action widened the gap between Balochis and Central government (Ahmad, 2 July 2000).

**4.4. Musharraf Era and Bugti Killing:**

The confrontation between Musharraf and Bugti emerged over the issue of royalty. Bugti demanded an increase in royalty. The confrontation resulted in Bugti's death. The Musharraf regime outdid its predecessors. It not only added Gawadar, new cantonment plans, Akbar Bugti's killing and disappearances to Baluchistan's festering sores, it also dared the nationalists to climb the mountains and put a seal on its implacability by dismissing the recommendations of a sympathetic Senate committee (Rehman, 2008).



**5. Ethnic Fragmentation in KPK**

The NWFP (North West Frontier Province) recently renamed as KPK (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) is the Pashtun predominant province. However, the vast majority in Hazara and Dera Ismail Khan speak Hindko and Seraiki languages respectively. Historically, this linguistic divide also affected the politics of the province. At the time of partition, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the Pashtun leader, wanted a separate country for Pashtuns. On the other hand, Hindko and Seraiki speaking people in majority supported Muslim League's demand for Pakistan.

The differences between central governments and the Pashtun nationalists surfaced over the political history of Pakistan since its creation. The central government sacked Dr. Khan's government in the early months over the pretext of losing majority in the house. The move further aggravated the Pashtun nationalism. The demand for Pashtunistan resurfaced. However, the movement never posed a serious threat to Pakistan because it did not receive wide support among the Pashtun (S.M. Burke, 1990).

Later on, the demand for separate state transformed into renaming of the province as Pakhtunkhwa. However, the people of Hazara and Dera Ismail Khan strongly resisted the move. The fight over the renaming of the province ended the ten years electro-political alliance of PML and ANP. The coalition government of Yousaf Raza Gillani accepted ANP demand and renamed the province. The move ultimately increased the sense of ethnicity among other ethnic groups and the demand for separate provinces over ethnic grounds from Mohajirs, Seraiki and Hazara community reinforced. (S.M. Burke, 1990) (S.M. Burke, 1990)

**6. Ethnic Fragmentation in Sindh**

At the time of partition, thousands of immigrants came to Pakistan and settled in different areas. However, the main settlements were made in Punjab and Sindh. During 1947-51 about one million refugees were settled in Sindh and prime urban properties were allotted to newcomers generously. These settlements changed the demographic conditions of the Sindh. They gained a majority in Karachi, Hyderabad, Mirpur Khas, and Nawab Shah (Kardar, 1992).

The Sindhis resented the concentration of the Mohajirs in their province for their monopoly over government jobs, state institutions, and favors in allotting urban properties. The political and ethnic polarization that has taken violent form in Sindh goes back to the early years of Pakistan's policy of resettlement of immigrants from India (Akhtar, 2013). Furthermore, the influx from other

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provinces in search of jobs in Karachi also affected the demographic conditions.

Pakistan is a fragmented state and the identities are committed to retain their identity with their languages. In 1970s, Bhutto's government allowed the Sindhi language as the official language in Sindh province. Akhtar believed that Bhutto foresight the emerging power of the Urdu Speaking and wanted to protect his political power. The specific legislation generated discontent among other identities and they demanded that their language identities be protected constitutionally.

Later on, Bhutto also introduced a quota system in provincial and federal governments which further widen the rural-urban and Sindhi-Urdu divide. Although the quota system was also introduced in other provinces, however, the consequences in Sindh were much higher and sever. The said divide also affected the political canvass of the province. To counter the political power of PPP, Zia patronized the Urdu-speaking community and helped them to form their political identity, Mohajar Qomi Movement (MQM) (Akhtar, 2013).

Since 1988, MQM had become the single largest party in Karachi and Hyderabad. The party has been enjoying the overwhelming support from the Urdu-speaking community and availing all the tactics to pursue its nationalist ethnic agenda. Central governments (both of PML and PPP) launched military operations to control the violence and arrested hundreds of MQM workers in alleging for their involvement in kidnapping, target killing, and extortion (Azhar, 1997). However, all these military operations did not succeed to decrease party's political and electoral support. Later on, the Musharraf's undue support to MQM further reinforced the party and its grip over the politics of Karachi and Hyderabad became more strengthened. Now a day, although the party is facing a hard time and disintegrated into many factions, but it is quite difficult to convert ethnonationalism to Pakistan nationalism.

### **7. Punjab and Ethnic Divide:**

Punjab is the most populous province of the Pakistan and Punjabi constituting the overwhelming majority (Kennedy, 1991). Multan, Bahawalpur and Dera Ghazi Khan, the three administrative divisions of Punjab, called the Seraiki belt. The Seraikis claim that "they have a separate language and culture, but their language is often viewed as a dialect of Sindhi or Punjabi" (Ibid). In 1960s, Riaz Hashmi, a Seraiki nationalist started a movement to gain official language status for Seraiki. He also initiated efforts for the new province for Seraiki. However, Zia diffused the movement (Akhtar, 2013). After his death, the movement reemerged, demanded radio and television transmission in

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Seraiki and printing the official documents in the Seraiki language (Raja, 2012). The nucleus of these movements was to protect Seraiki culture and to gain a separate province. In 1969, the people of formerly princely state Bahawalpur launched an agitation against the possible merger of the state in Punjab. The movement succeeded to get the momentum and all the candidates fielded by the Bahawalpur Muthida Mahaz (Bahawalpur United Front-BUF) won all the provincial and national assemblies seats in election 1970. The East Pakistan crises upset all the proposition and the movement defused. However, the demand for the separate province surfaced time to time. The ousted Prime Minister, Syed Yousaf Raza Gillani, made some political moves in this regard but failed to be fruitful.

It is quite important to mention here that the demand for Seraiki Province never divided the electoral outcomes pertaining to this issue. The contestants have never made their electoral campaigns on this particular issue as the belt has remained the base for other lingual identities in good numbers. The accommodation culture never erupted into lingual violence and all the identities have been living peacefully.

### **8. Democracy in Pakistan: Inclusivity or Exclusivity?**

Ethnicity, both in its subjective and objective forms is determined by the political conditions and electoral outcomes. Uneven development, irrational distribution of national resources and undue over-centralization of power fertile ethnic sentiments among the group members in a heterogeneous society. In Pakistan, ethnic identity submerges narrow caste and tribal identities into a larger whole.

“The politicization of an ethnic group usually gives rise to common demands which reinforce the political consciousness of the ethnic group. Mobilization may produce militancy, terrorism; or involve the community in a democratic process to effect a desired a political change” (Anayatullah, 1993).

Pluralism, inclusion, political tolerance, and equal politico-economic opportunities are the fruits of a real democracy. Constitutional and political legitimacy, fair, free and transparent electoral system for political recruitment, fundamental liberty and equality, inclusion, rule of law and across the board accountability are the pre-requisites of democratization. Moreover, the functioning of mainstream political parties in the true spirit reinforces the democratic process. Unavailability of these creates a vacuum for ethnic groups. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, the true democratic system has never been evolved and developed.

“Centralization of governmental authority, military rule and its intervention in politics, and the feudal mentality has only complicated ethnic politics in Pakistan. The fundamental challenge that the developing democracies face is this; how to accommodate the interests of the ethnic minorities?” (Ghosh,1996).

In Pakistan, the undemocratic process has enhanced ethnic conflicts. Military rulers patronized ethnic identities for the longevity of their rule. Mainstream political parties have been the soft target of military rulers and they had used all tactics to destabilize and disintegrate these political forces. The parties' weakness and decay further create political vacuum and space for ethnic identities. Internalization and institutionalization of ethnic sentiments further expand the gap and resultantly conflicts emerge. Military takeover and their judicial endorsement, dynastic political parties, uneven distribution of national resources and development and institutional decay are the major factors which have promoted ethnic diversities in Pakistan.

## **9. Conclusion:**

Ethnic politics appeal the masses when the mainstream political parties fail to address the prevailing issues on equality basis. In developing democracies, public policy cannot appeal and satisfy all the citizens. Resultantly, tribe, language and religion base politics emerge. However, it is the beauty of democracy that it legitimizes the electoral power of ethnic political parties. In Pakistan, most of the ethnic and regional political identities either have lost out to their mainstream political rivals or have joined them in the broader national coalition. Baloch and Pashtun nationalists of Balochistan and KPK have enjoyed the coalition government at the provincial and central level with mainstream political parties and succeeded to fulfill their ethnic or regional demands of renaming the NWFP province to KPK. It is quite important to mention that democratic process, if works in true letter and spirit, opens the doors of dialogue and inclusivity that leads the society and the state more integrative. The democratic system facilitates political leaders of different regions and perspectives to come closer and make decisions in the interest of state collectively. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, dictatorial approach have been evolved and appreciated that had used to shun the process of dialogue and promoted exclusivity. Resultantly, the society became more fragmented on ethnic grounds and conflicts surfaced. However, mainstream political parties' policies to take all the stakeholders at the board have affected the polity of the state positively. But still need more efforts to address Balochis, Mohajars, Hazaras and Seraiki issues. The continuity of the democratic process in true letter and spirit will only solve all the contentions because democracy is the best framework under which various ethnic groups can find political space.

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