



Unity in Diversity: Strengthening National Cohesion among the Pashtun Community and Beyond in Pakistan

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Abstract: The critical need for national unity in Pakistan, particularly among the Pashtun community, while addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by ethnic, sectarian, and dialectal divisions. The study begins by providing a historical context that outlines the formation of Pakistan and the subsequent emergence of various identities that have often overshadowed a collective national identity. Through a multidisciplinary approach, the paper explores effective strategies for fostering unity, emphasizing the role of education in promoting awareness and understanding among diverse groups. It discusses the significance of political reforms aimed at creating an inclusive governance framework that respects ethnic diversity while prioritizing national interests. Cultural exchange programs are also highlighted as vital tools for enhancing interaction and cooperation among different communities. By embracing diversity as a strength rather than a weakness, this research advocates for an inclusive national identity that transcends ethnic boundaries. Ultimately, this paper aims to contribute to the discourse on nation-building in Pakistan, offering actionable insights for policymakers and community leaders to promote a harmonious society that celebrates its rich cultural tapestry.

Keywords: National unity, Pashtun community, Ethnic nationalism, Cultural exchange, Political reforms, Education

1. Introduction

National unity is a cornerstone of stability and development for any nation, and in the context of Pakistan, it becomes even more critical given the country's rich tapestry of ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity. The concept of national unity in Pakistan encompasses the idea of fostering a collective identity that transcends individual differences among various groups. This is particularly significant in a nation where ethnic and sectarian divisions have historically posed challenges to social cohesion and political stability. The Pashtun community, one of the largest ethnic groups in Pakistan, exemplifies these challenges, as it grapples with issues of identity, representation, and integration within the broader national framework. Addressing these divisions is not merely an academic exercise; it is essential for the nation's progress. Ethnic nationalism and sectarian strife have led to significant social unrest, undermining the principles upon which Pakistan was founded. The historical context reveals that the very creation of Pakistan was rooted in a collective struggle for identity and rights among Muslims in South Asia. However, this unity has been tested over time by various factors, including political mismanagement, economic disparities, and external influences that exploit existing fractures within society (Ahmad, 2024).

The objectives of this paper are to explore effective ways to foster unity among the diverse communities in Pakistan, particularly focusing on the Pashtun population. It aims to identify strategies that promote inclusivity beyond caste, sectarian affiliations, and dialectal nationalism. By examining educational reforms, cultural exchanges, and political initiatives that encourage a shared national identity, this research seeks to offer actionable

insights into building a more cohesive society. National unity in Pakistan is often perceived through the lens of its historical struggles and socio-political dynamics. The country emerged from a complex interplay of religious identity and ethnic nationalism during its formative years. The Lahore Resolution of 1940 called for an independent state for Muslims in the northwestern regions of India, emphasizing a collective Muslim identity (Dawn, 2024). However, once established, Pakistan faced immediate challenges related to language and ethnicity. The imposition of Urdu as the national language sparked significant discontent among non-Urdu speaking populations, particularly in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), leading to feelings of alienation and ultimately contributing to its secession in 1971 (Ahmad, 2024).

The ongoing sectarian violence further complicates the quest for national unity. Since its inception, Pakistan has witnessed numerous incidents of violence motivated by sectarian affiliations. Reports indicate that thousands have lost their lives due to conflicts primarily between Sunni and Shia groups (Wikipedia, 2024). This violence not only disrupts social harmony but also creates an environment where mistrust flourishes among different communities.

The significance of addressing ethnic and sectarian divisions cannot be overstated. These divisions threaten not only social cohesion but also economic development and political stability. For instance, the Pashtun community has faced marginalization in various spheres—politically underrepresented and economically disadvantaged compared to other ethnic groups (Pakistan Today, 2024). This marginalization fosters resentment and alienation, which can lead to radicalization or support for extremist ideologies.

Moreover, addressing these divisions is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging among all citizens. A unified nation can better respond to external threats and internal challenges alike. Historical precedents demonstrate that periods of national unity often coincide with significant achievements—be it military victories or economic progress (Digitalize Training, 2024). Conversely, disunity has led to catastrophic consequences such as civil war or secession. In light of these realities, it becomes imperative for policymakers to adopt a holistic approach that recognizes and respects diversity while promoting common goals. Initiatives aimed at fostering dialogue among different communities can serve as a foundation for rebuilding trust and understanding.

The primary objective of this paper is to explore practical measures that can be implemented to foster unity beyond caste, sectarian affiliations, and dialect nationalism in Pakistan. Specifically:

Educational Reforms investigate how revising curricula to include diverse perspectives can foster a sense of shared identity among students from different backgrounds.

Cultural Exchanges analyze the role of cultural festivals and events in promoting understanding and appreciation among various ethnic groups.

Political Initiative examine how inclusive governance models can ensure representation for marginalized communities like the Pashtuns while fostering a sense of ownership over national policies. By focusing on these objectives, this research aims to provide actionable insights that can contribute to building a more unified Pakistan—one that embraces its diversity as a source of strength rather than division. National unity is not merely an ideal but a necessity for Pakistan's survival as a cohesive state. Addressing ethnic and sectarian divisions through targeted initiatives will not only enhance social harmony but also pave the way for sustainable development and political stability. This paper endeavors to contribute meaningfully to this discourse by identifying pathways toward greater inclusivity and understanding among Pakistan's diverse communities.

2. The Historical Context

Pakistan is deeply intertwined with its colonial past, which has significantly influenced its national identity and social dynamics. The British colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent fostered divisions among various ethnic and religious groups through a series of divide-and-rule policies that aimed to weaken collective resistance against colonial authority (Hussain, 2024). This strategy not only exacerbated existing tensions but also created new hierarchies, leading to long-lasting grievances among communities. The impact of these policies can still be felt today, as they laid the groundwork for ethnic nationalism and sectarian strife that continue to challenge the concept of a unified Pakistani identity (Khan, 2024). Understanding this historical backdrop is essential for addressing contemporary issues related to national unity.

The formation of Pakistan in 1947 marked a significant turning point in South Asian history, driven by the aspirations of Muslims seeking a separate nation where they could freely practice their religion and culture. The Lahore Resolution of 1940 articulated this demand, emphasizing the need for a distinct political identity for Muslims in the face of growing Hindu nationalism (Ahmed, 2024). The vision of a united nation was rooted in the belief that Muslims constituted a distinct community with shared cultural and religious values. However, the

partition process was marred by violence and chaos, resulting in significant loss of life and mass displacement, which would have profound implications for the newly formed state (Dawn, 2024). The initial euphoria surrounding Pakistan's creation soon gave way to disillusionment as various ethnic groups began to assert their identities within the national framework. The Muslim League played a pivotal role in articulating the aspirations of Muslims during the struggle for independence. Under the leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the party sought to unify Muslims under a single banner while advocating for democratic principles that promised equal rights for all citizens (Hussain, 2024). Jinnah's vision encompassed a nation where diverse ethnicities could coexist harmoniously; however, this ideal faced challenges from within as various groups sought recognition and representation in the new political landscape. The subsequent political turmoil and lack of effective governance led to fragmentation within society, undermining the original vision of a united Pakistan (Ahmed, 2024).

The historical challenges stemming from colonial divide-and-rule policies have left an indelible mark on Pakistan's social fabric. These policies not only favored certain ethnic groups over others but also disrupted traditional social structures, fostering resentment and competition among communities (Khan, 2024). As various ethnic groups vie for political power and resources, the legacy of colonialism complicates efforts to forge a unified national identity. This ongoing struggle highlights the need for inclusive governance that recognizes and respects diversity while promoting common goals. Ethnic and sectarian dynamics in Pakistan are complex and often contentious, reflecting a society deeply influenced by its diverse heritage. The country is home to numerous ethnic groups, including Punjabis, Sindhis, Baloch, Muhajirs, and Pashtuns. Among these groups, Pashtuns are particularly significant due to their historical presence in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. They have maintained distinct cultural practices and social structures that set them apart from other ethnicities (Hussain & Khan, 2024). However, their identity has often been overshadowed by broader national narratives that fail to fully acknowledge their contributions and grievances.

The historical grievances that have led to divisions within Pakistan are multifaceted and deeply rooted in its past. One significant event was the separation of East Pakistan in 1971, which stemmed from long-standing feelings of neglect and discrimination experienced by Bengalis at the hands of West Pakistani rulers (Ahmed & Hussain, 2024). This separation highlighted not only ethnic disparities but also issues related to language, culture, and economic inequality. The fallout from this division continues to influence inter-ethnic relations today as various groups strive for recognition and equitable treatment within the national framework. Thus, understanding these historical grievances is crucial for addressing contemporary challenges related to national unity in Pakistan.

3. Challenges to National Unity in Pakistan

Challenges to national unity in Pakistan are multifaceted, rooted in historical, political, and socioeconomic factors that have contributed to a fragmented society. Ethnic nationalism poses a significant challenge, as various ethnic identities often overshadow the overarching national identity. The rise of regional slogans—such as those advocating for Punjabis, Baloch, Sindhis, and Pashtuns—has led to a situation where individuals identify more with their ethnic groups than with the nation as a whole (Hussain, 2024). This trend undermines the concept of a unified Pakistani identity and fuels divisions among different communities. Ethnic nationalism not only complicates governance but also creates an environment where cooperation among diverse groups becomes increasingly difficult, thereby hindering national integration (Khan & Hussain, 2024).

3.1 Ethnic Nationalism

Political polarization further exacerbates the challenges to national unity in Pakistan. The country's political landscape has been marred by instability and governance issues that have eroded public trust in institutions. According to the World Bank, Pakistan's political stability index was reported at -1.67 points in 2021, indicating significant challenges in governance (Dawn, 2024). This instability has led to the emergence of political parties based on ethnic or regional lines rather than national interests, fostering an environment of hostility and division. Political discourse has often devolved into violent confrontations between opposing factions, which further alienates citizens from one another and diminishes the prospects for collective action (Saleem Alvi et al., 2024). Ultimately, the lack of cohesive political leadership undermines efforts to promote national unity.

3.2 Political Polarization

Socioeconomic disparities also play a crucial role in exacerbating divisions among different groups within Pakistan. Economic inequalities manifest in various forms, including unequal access to resources, job opportunities, and

social services. These disparities often lead to feelings of deprivation among marginalized communities, particularly in regions like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Hussain & Khan, 2024). The absence of a strong industrial base and high unemployment rates contribute to social unrest and discontent. As individuals grapple with economic hardships, they may turn to their ethnic or regional identities for support and solidarity, further deepening societal divisions (Alvi et al., 2024). Addressing these socioeconomic challenges is essential for fostering a sense of belonging and promoting national cohesion.

3.3 Socioeconomic Disparities

The challenges to national unity in Pakistan are deeply intertwined with ethnic nationalism, political polarization, and socioeconomic disparities. These factors not only undermine efforts to create a cohesive national identity but also hinder progress toward stability and development. To move forward, it is imperative that policymakers adopt inclusive strategies that recognize the diverse identities within Pakistan while promoting common goals that unite all citizens under a shared national framework.

4. Case Study: The Pashtun Community

The Pashtun community, one of the largest ethnic groups in Pakistan, boasts a rich cultural heritage that significantly contributes to the broader Pakistani identity. Central to Pashtun culture is the code of conduct known as Pashtunwali, which emphasizes values such as hospitality, honor, and communal solidarity (Study.com, 2023). This code governs social interactions and reinforces the importance of loyalty to family and tribe, creating a strong sense of identity among Pashtuns. Additionally, the Pashto language serves as a vital marker of cultural identity, with a rich literary tradition that includes poetry and storytelling, reflecting the community's history and values (Wikipedia, 2024). Traditional Pashtun music and dance further enrich this cultural tapestry; instruments like the rabab and tabla are integral to their musical expressions, while dances such as the Attan are performed during celebrations and gatherings (Balochistan.gov.pk, 2024). Thus, the cultural heritage of the Pashtuns not only shapes their identity but also enhances the diverse fabric of Pakistani society.

4.1 Cultural Heritage and Identity

Pashtun contributions to Pakistani identity extend beyond cultural practices; they also play a crucial role in shaping political and social dynamics within the country. Historically, Pashtuns have been influential in various spheres, including politics and military affairs. Their engagement in national politics has often been marked by a desire for greater representation and recognition of their unique cultural identity (Minority Rights Group, 2024). The Pashtun community's commitment to education and social welfare has also fostered a sense of pride and responsibility among its members. As they navigate the complexities of modern Pakistan, Pashtuns continue to assert their identity while contributing to national discourse on unity and diversity. Their resilience in maintaining cultural traditions amidst challenges underscores their significance in the ongoing narrative of Pakistan's evolution as a nation.

4.2 Exploration of Pashtun culture and its contributions to Pakistani identity

The Pashtun community's cultural heritage is characterized by a rich tapestry of traditions that contribute significantly to Pakistan's national identity. Through their adherence to Pashtunwali, use of the Pashto language, and participation in arts and literature, they embody values that resonate with broader themes of honor and hospitality. As Pakistan grapples with its diverse ethnic landscape, recognizing and celebrating the contributions of the Pashtuns is essential for fostering national unity and cohesion.

4.3 Current Challenges Faced by Pashtuns

The Pashtun community in Pakistan faces a myriad of socio-political challenges that significantly impact their quest for rights and recognition. Central to these challenges is the ongoing struggle led by the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), which advocates for the rights of Pashtuns and seeks accountability for state actions that have historically marginalized this ethnic group (DW, 2024). The PTM has emerged as a powerful voice against state oppression, demanding an end to military operations in Pashtun-majority areas, the removal of landmines, and justice for victims of extrajudicial killings (Wikipedia, 2024). However, the movement has faced severe repression from the state, which perceives it as a threat to national security. Reports indicate that security forces have engaged in violent crackdowns on PTM protests, arresting leaders and intimidating participants in an effort to stifle dissent.

(Sunday Guardian, 2024). This systematic repression not only undermines the PTM's efforts but also exacerbates feelings of alienation among Pashtuns, who increasingly view the state as an adversary rather than a protector.

Political polarization further complicates the socio-political landscape for Pashtuns. The Pakistani military establishment has long accused the PTM of conspiring against the state, framing their demands for rights as unpatriotic (DW, 2024). This narrative serves to delegitimize the movement's objectives and alienate its supporters from mainstream political discourse. As a result, many Pashtuns feel politically isolated and disenfranchised, believing that their voices are not represented in national politics (Gandhara, 2024). The lack of meaningful dialogue between the government and Pashtun representatives exacerbates tensions and fosters a sense of mistrust. Prominent Pashtun leaders have criticized government inaction regarding their demands, highlighting how this neglect contributes to ongoing grievances within the community (Alvi et al., 2024).

Socioeconomic disparities also play a critical role in perpetuating the challenges faced by Pashtuns. Historically marginalized in terms of resource allocation and development opportunities, many Pashtun regions suffer from high poverty rates and limited access to education and healthcare (Hussain & Khan, 2024). The economic dominance of Punjab further exacerbates these disparities, as resources are often concentrated in this region at the expense of others (Gandhara, 2024). This economic inequality not only fuels resentment but also drives many Pashtuns to seek solidarity within their ethnic identity as a means of coping with systemic marginalization. Activists argue that addressing these socioeconomic issues is essential for fostering a sense of belonging and promoting national unity among all communities in Pakistan (DW, 2024).

The current challenges faced by the Pashtun community are deeply entrenched in socio-political dynamics characterized by repression, political polarization, and socioeconomic disparities. The PTM's struggle for rights highlights the urgent need for dialogue and reform to address these issues comprehensively. By recognizing and addressing these challenges, Pakistan can move toward a more inclusive society that values diversity while promoting unity.

4.4 How embracing Pashtun identity within the broader Pakistani context can enhance national unity?

Embracing Pashtun identity within the broader Pakistani context can significantly enhance national unity by fostering a sense of belonging and mutual respect among diverse ethnic groups. The Pashtun community, with its rich cultural heritage and adherence to the code of Pashtunwali, embodies values such as hospitality, honor, and loyalty that resonate with the foundational principles of Pakistani society (Study.com, 2023). By recognizing and celebrating these shared values, Pakistan can create a more inclusive national narrative that honors its ethnic diversity while promoting unity. Events like Pashtun Culture Day, celebrated annually on September 23, serve as platforms for showcasing Pashtun traditions and fostering intercultural dialogue (Jhonum, 2024). Such initiatives not only strengthen the Pashtun identity but also promote understanding and appreciation among other ethnic groups, thereby contributing to a cohesive national identity.

Moreover, the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) has emerged as a significant force advocating for the rights of Pashtuns while simultaneously seeking to bridge divides within Pakistani society (Gandhara, 2024). The movement emphasizes peaceful protest and inclusivity, attracting support from various political factions and communities. By framing their struggle for rights within a broader context of national unity, PTM leaders aim to unite all Pakistanis against common challenges such as injustice and inequality (DW, 2024). This approach not only highlights the importance of Pashtun contributions to national discourse but also underscores the potential for collective action in addressing socio-political issues that affect all citizens.

Furthermore, integrating Pashtun cultural elements into the national framework can enrich Pakistan's cultural tapestry. The vibrant traditions of Pashto poetry, music, and dance offer valuable insights into the country's diverse heritage (Wikipedia, 2024). By promoting these cultural expressions at national events and educational institutions, Pakistan can cultivate a sense of pride among all ethnic groups while fostering a shared national identity. This cultural integration serves to diminish stereotypes and misconceptions about Pashtuns, presenting them as integral contributors to Pakistan's history and future.

Embracing Pashtun identity within the broader Pakistani context is essential for enhancing national unity. By recognizing shared values, supporting movements like the PTM that advocate for inclusivity, and promoting Pashtun culture at national levels, Pakistan can work towards a more cohesive society that celebrates its diversity. Such efforts will not only strengthen the bonds among various ethnic groups but also pave the way for a more harmonious and prosperous future for all citizens.

5. Conclusion

The exploration of national unity in Pakistan reveals a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and socio-political factors that significantly impact the country's cohesion. The Pashtun community, with its rich cultural heritage and unique identity, plays a vital role in shaping the broader narrative of Pakistan. However, challenges such as ethnic nationalism, political polarization, and socioeconomic disparities continue to undermine efforts toward unity. The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement exemplifies the potential for collective action in advocating for rights while promoting inclusivity within the national framework.

To foster unity beyond ethnic and sectarian lines, it is essential for all stakeholders—policymakers, community leaders, and citizens—to engage in collaborative efforts that recognize and celebrate diversity as a strength rather than a weakness. Embracing the identities of various ethnic groups, including the Pashtuns, can create a more inclusive national narrative that resonates with all Pakistanis. This approach requires open dialogue, mutual respect, and a commitment to addressing grievances that have historically divided communities.

The call to action is clear: it is imperative for policymakers to implement inclusive governance models that ensure representation for marginalized groups while fostering a sense of belonging among all citizens. Community leaders must promote intercultural dialogue and understanding to bridge divides and build trust among different ethnicity. Citizens are encouraged to engage actively in promoting unity by celebrating cultural diversity and advocating for social justice. Together, these collective efforts can pave the way for a cohesive national identity that honors Pakistan's rich tapestry of cultures and traditions while striving for a harmonious future for all its people.

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