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POLITICS OF IDENTITY AND THE CRISIS OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN PAKISTAN: AN ANALYSIS

Dr. Muhammad Kamran Khan[*1], Abdul Muneeb Khan[2], Syed Muhammad Baqir Mustafa[3]

*[*1]Assistant Professor Department of Political Science, University of Karachi*
[2,3]Research Scholar, University of Karachi

Corresponding Author: *
Dr. Muhammad Kamran Khan
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ABSTRACT

The crisis of national integration in Pakistan has remained one of the most persistent and structurally embedded challenges confronting the state since its emergence in 1947. Despite being founded on a shared religious identity that was expected to transcend ethnic, linguistic, and regional distinctions, the Pakistani state has struggled to harmonize its diverse identities into a cohesive and inclusive national framework. This article critically examines the politics of identity in Pakistan and evaluates its implications for national integration and state stability. Drawing upon classical and contemporary theories of nationalism, identity politics, and post-colonial state formation, the study explores how historical trajectories, constitutional arrangements, center–province relations, military interventions, and elite manipulation of identity have collectively contributed to recurring crises of integration. The article argues that Pakistan's integration dilemma cannot be reduced merely to diversity; rather, it is the outcome of politicized identities operating within a context of centralized governance, weak democratic institutions, and uneven socio-economic development. The study concludes by proposing a pluralistic, constitutional, and development-oriented approach to identity management as a prerequisite for sustainable national integration and long-term political stability.

Keywords: *Identity Politics, National Integration, Federalism, Ethnicity, Pakistan, State Formation*

1. INTRODUCTION

National integration is a foundational requirement for political stability, state legitimacy, and socio-economic development, particularly in post-colonial societies characterized by deep-seated ethnic, linguistic, and cultural pluralism. In such fragmented contexts, integration is rarely an automatic byproduct of statehood; rather, it is the deliberate result of sophisticated institutional design, inclusive governance, and a commitment to equitable development. In the absence of these factors, the "imagined community" of the nation-state often fractures along sub-national fault lines, leading to a perpetual crisis of authority.

Pakistan represents a compelling and perhaps unique case in the Global South where identity politics has played a decisive role in both the genesis of the state and its subsequent political conflicts. Founded on the "Two-Nation Theory," which asserted that the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent constituted a distinct nation, the state was born with a powerful, albeit singular, ideological mandate. However, the unifying canopy of Islam—which successfully mobilized diverse populations for a separate homeland—proved insufficient as a post-independence governing framework. Once the external "other" (the British and the Hindu-majority Congress) was removed, the internal diversity of the Pakistani Muslim population began to assert

itself. The state has since faced enduring tensions rooted in ethnic, linguistic, regional, and sectarian identities that the original nationalist narrative failed to fully accommodate (Jalal, 1995).

The paradox of Pakistan's national experience lies in the coexistence of a powerful, state-sponsored ideological foundation with a persistent, and at times violent, internal fragmentation. This tension is not merely academic; it has had catastrophic territorial consequences. The secession of East Pakistan in 1971 remains the most significant failure of national integration in the 20th century, resulting in the birth of Bangladesh and the definitive shattering of the myth that a shared religion alone could override linguistic and economic grievances. Despite this traumatic rupture, the lessons of 1971 appear only partially learned. In the contemporary era, the state continues to grapple with long-standing unrest in Balochistan—a conflict rooted in "resource nationalism"—and the complex political mobilization in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) has challenged the state's security-centric paradigm.

These crises raise fundamental questions regarding the nature of Pakistani nationalism and the structural effectiveness of its federal institutions. Is the Pakistani state a "Security State" that views sub-national identities as existential threats, or a "Developmental State" capable of embracing pluralism? This article seeks to address three core investigative questions:

1. Why has national integration remained elusive in Pakistan despite a shared religious identity?
2. How has the elite-led politicization of identity—both by the center and the periphery—contributed to chronic political instability?
3. What institutional mechanisms (such as the 18th Amendment) and ideological shifts are required to mitigate these recurring crises of integration?

Employing a qualitative and interpretive methodology, this study situates Pakistan's integration crisis within broader theoretical debates on "Official Nationalism" (Anderson, 1983) and the "Overdeveloped State" (Alavi, 1972). By grounding its analysis in historical trajectories, constitutional engineering, and the shifting dynamics of center-province relations, the article argues that the crisis of integration is not an inevitable outcome of Pakistan's diversity, but a consequence of a hyper-centralized power structure that has historically privileged uniformity over unity.

2. Theoretical Framework: Identity, Nationalism, and Integration

The crisis of national integration in Pakistan is not merely a localized phenomenon but is deeply embedded in broader sociopolitical processes of identity construction, the evolution of modern nationalism, and the mechanics of social communication within a post-colonial state. To understand why Pakistan has frequently oscillated between periods of ideological cohesion and ethnic fragmentation, it is necessary to examine the theoretical underpinnings of how groups identify themselves and how the state attempts to manage those identifications.

2.1 Identity Politics and the Constructivist Approach

Identity politics refers to political mobilization organized around shared characteristics such as ethnicity, language, religion, sect, or region, often serving as a primary mechanism for negotiating power and resources within the apparatus of the state (Fearon & Laitin, 2000). While primordialist perspectives argue that identities are ancient, "natural," and immutable—implying that ethnic conflict is an inevitable result of "ancient hatreds"—this study adopts a constructivist approach. This lens emphasizes that identities are socially constructed, politically activated, and highly context-dependent. They are not static relics of the past but fluid boundaries that are redrawn based on contemporary political needs.

In the Pakistani context, ethnic and regional identities have historically transitioned from dormant cultural markers to militant political categories during periods of acute economic deprivation, political exclusion, or institutional failure. For instance, the transformation of "Bengali" from a linguistic category into a separatist political identity was not an overnight occurrence but a decades-long construction fueled by the denial of linguistic rights and economic parity. Constructivism allows us to see

that political elites and "ethnic entrepreneurs" (Brubaker, 2004) often instrumentalize these narratives to mobilize support or challenge the center's authority. In weak institutional environments where the state fails to provide a neutral platform for grievance redressal, identity becomes a potent substitute for programmatic, issue-based politics. Consequently, groups that perceive themselves as marginalized from the "inner circle" of state power—typically the civil-military bureaucracy—retreat into sub-national identities as a rational strategy to bargain with, or resist, a perceived predatory center.

2.2 Nationalism and State Formation

The trajectory of Pakistan's state-building can be analyzed through the tension between civic nationalism and ethnic/ideological nationalism. Classical theories distinguish between civic nationalism, which is predicated on shared political values, legal equality, and inclusive citizenship, and ethnic nationalism, which is rooted in common ancestry, culture, or religion (Smith, 1991). Pakistan's foundational project leaned heavily toward an ideological-religious form of nationalism. This "Muslim Nationalism" was extraordinarily effective as a tool for anti-colonial mobilization, creating a broad-based coalition across disparate linguistic groups (Punjabis, Bengalis, Sindhis, etc.) under the banner of a shared faith.

However, as Ayesha Jalal (2004) observes, while Islam provided a potent symbolic unity during the struggle for a homeland, it did not offer a comprehensive, modern framework for managing the internal diversity of a multi-ethnic state once independence was achieved. Post-independence leadership, fearing that the recognition of sub-national identities would lead to the "balkanization" of the country, pursued what Benedict Anderson (1983) terms "official nationalism." This is a top-down project where the state attempts to merge the "nation" with the "state" through centralized institutions, a single national language policy (Urdu), and strict ideological conformity. In this paradigm, sub-national expressions were framed as "provincialism"—a pejorative term synonymous with treason. Because the state failed to transition from this exclusionary ideological nationalism to a pluralistic civic nationalism, the "imagined community" of Pakistan remained fragile, contested, and prone to rupture whenever the state's coercive grip loosened.

2.3 National Integration and Social Communication

National integration is defined as the process of creating shared political loyalty and a collective sense of belonging among diverse social groups (Deutsch, 1966). Karl Deutsch's theory of social communication provides a vital metric for this: integration succeeds when the rate of social mobilization (the increase in people becoming politically aware) is matched or exceeded by the rate of institutional assimilation. In a healthy state, as people become more educated and urbanized, they are integrated into the national fabric through political parties, labor unions, and a representative bureaucracy.

In Pakistan, a dangerous "scissors crisis" emerged: political awareness and social mobilization expanded rapidly through education, mass media, and urbanization, but the state's institutions remained rigid, exclusionary, and dominated by a narrow civil-military oligarchy. This structural imbalance produced the conditions of "political decay," as famously theorized by Samuel Huntington (1968). In this state of decay, the masses' demand for participation outpaces the elite's willingness to create inclusive institutions. When the formal channels of the state—such as a sovereign parliament or an independent local government system—are blocked, political energy is diverted into the only available avenues: ethnic and sectarian identities.

Integration, therefore, is not the byproduct of suppressing diversity via a "melting pot" approach; rather, it is the result of "salad bowl" pluralism, where diversity is institutionalized through robust federalism, equitable resource distribution (such as the NFC awards), and the constitutional recognition of cultural rights. Without these institutional "safety valves," social communication in Pakistan has frequently led to polarization rather than cohesion.

3. Historical Roots of Identity Politics in Pakistan

The contemporary crises of national integration in Pakistan are not spontaneous malfunctions of the modern state but are deeply embedded in the historical soil of the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries. To understand the friction between the center and the periphery, one must analyze the transition from colonial administrative logic to the post-colonial "security state" paradigm.

3.1 Colonial Legacies and the Divide-and-Rule Paradigm

British colonial rule in South Asia was not merely a period of political occupation but a project of social engineering that profoundly reshaped how individuals and groups perceived their identities. The British Raj institutionalized divisions along religious, ethnic, and linguistic lines through a series of "knowledge projects"—most notably the decennial census, which forced fluid, overlapping identities into rigid, mutually exclusive political categories (Metcalf & Metcalf, 2006). By creating communal electorates and allocating state resources based on these newly codified categories, the colonial administration incentivized groups to mobilize around narrow identities to secure patronage, effectively embedding "identity politics" into the DNA of the region's political culture.

A critical component of this legacy was the **"Martial Race" theory**, a pseudo-scientific military doctrine developed after the 1857 Uprising. The British began to recruit soldiers almost exclusively from specific "loyal" ethnicities—primarily Punjabi Muslims, Sikhs, and Pashtuns—while systematically excluding "seditionist" groups like the Bengalis and Sindhis. By 1947, this had created a profound institutional asymmetry: the Punjab province, though only one part of the new state, provided the vast majority of the army's manpower. Statistics from the era of independence show that while East Bengal contained over **55% of the population**, its representation in the officer corps was less than **5%**. This lopsided "overdeveloped" coercive apparatus meant that at its birth, Pakistan possessed a powerful military and bureaucracy but lacked the representative political institutions necessary to mediate between its diverse ethnic constituents.

3.2 The Two-Nation Theory and Its Post-Colonial Transition

The Two-Nation Theory served as the ideological bedrock of the Pakistan movement, asserting that Muslims and Hindus were two distinct nations with irreconcilable interests. While this narrative was a masterclass in political mobilization during the anti-colonial struggle, it proved dangerously inadequate as a blueprint for post-independence nation-building. The theory functioned as a "negative" identity—it defined what Muslims were *not* (Hindus)—but it failed to articulate a "positive" vision for how a Punjabi, a Bengali, and a Baloch would share power within a single state.

Upon independence, the ruling elite—largely composed of Urdu-speaking Muhajirs and Punjabi landowners—sought to maintain unity by imposing a monolithic national identity. This "Official Nationalism" was epitomized by Muhammad Ali Jinnah's 1948 declaration in Dhaka that "Urdu, and only Urdu" would be the state language. To the Bengali majority, who took immense pride in their linguistic heritage and comprised the demographic bulk of the nation, this was perceived as an act of cultural imperialism. The state's insistence on a singular language and a centralized ideological narrative did not forge a "new Pakistani man"; instead, it alienated the very communities it sought to integrate. As Hamza Alavi (1986) noted, the state used Islam as a "homogenizing glue" to delegitimize regional demands, labeling any call for provincial autonomy as a "threat to the Ummah" or a "conspiracy against the faith."

3.3 The 1971 Disintegration: A Structural Failure

The secession of East Pakistan and the subsequent creation of Bangladesh in 1971 represent the ultimate structural failure of national integration. The crisis was the culmination of twenty-four years of systemic exclusion. Economically, East Pakistan functioned as a "hinterland" for the West; while Bengali jute exports provided the lion's share of the country's foreign exchange, the revenue was disproportionately invested in the industrialization of West Punjab and the construction of a new capital in Islamabad.

The breaking point was the general election of 1970—the first in Pakistan's history based on "one man, one vote." The Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, won a landslide victory, securing **160 out of 162 seats** in East Pakistan, which gave them an absolute majority in the National Assembly. However, the military-

bureaucratic elite in the West, unwilling to cede power to a "provincial" Bengali leadership, refused to convene the assembly.

Indicator (1970)	East Pakistan (Bengali)	West Pakistan
Population Share	55%	45%
Share of Total Revenue Expenditure	23%	77%
Representation in Army Officer Corps	7%	93%
Representation in Civil Service (CSP)	15%	85%

The subsequent military crackdown, "Operation Searchlight," replaced political dialogue with state-sponsored violence, effectively dissolving the social contract. The secession of the East proved that a shared religious identity cannot survive the weight of economic exploitation and political disenfranchisement. Critically, for the study of integration, the 1971 war demonstrated that a "Security State" that prioritizes territorial integrity over the rights of its citizens often ends up losing both. Despite this trauma, the post-1971 "New Pakistan" (the current West) largely failed to restructure its power dynamics, continuing to rely on a centralized, Punjab-centric model that would eventually trigger similar resentments in Balochistan and Sindh.

4. Ethnicity, Language, and Regionalism

In the post-1971 landscape, the "New Pakistan" was forced to confront the reality that religious identity alone could not submerge the distinct linguistic and cultural aspirations of its constituent parts. The failure to transition from a centralized administrative model to a genuine federalist one has allowed ethnic identity to remain the primary vehicle for political bargaining and resistance against the state.

4.1 Punjabi Dominance and the Overdeveloped State

Hamza Alavi's (1972) seminal concept of the **"overdeveloped state"** remains the most potent framework for understanding the structural imbalance of the Pakistani federation. Alavi argued that the colonial state created a military-bureaucratic apparatus that was far more sophisticated and powerful than the indigenous social classes or the nascent political parties it was meant to govern. Following independence, this "overdeveloped" executive branch—heavily dominated by the Punjabi ethnic group and Urdu-speaking Muhajir elites—assumed a tutelary role over the state, often dismissing elected governments in the name of "national interest" or "efficiency."

Punjab's sheer demographic weight—comprising approximately **53% of the total population** and holding **141 out of 272 general seats** in the National Assembly—creates a structural "majoritarianism" that leaves smaller provinces feeling perpetually sidelined. This is compounded by the ethnic composition of the security forces. While the military has made efforts to diversify, the officer corps remains overwhelmingly Punjabi. For the "periphery" (Sindh, Balochistan, and KP), the state often appears not as a neutral arbiter of national law, but as a vehicle for Punjabi economic and political expansion. This perception of a "Punjab-centric" state has fueled a defensive ethnic mobilization in other provinces, where sub-nationalism is seen as the only shield against institutional marginalization.

4.2 Balochistan and Resource Nationalism

Balochistan represents the most acute and enduring challenge to Pakistan's national integration. Despite being the largest province by landmass (approx. **44% of Pakistan's territory**), it is the least populated and most economically deprived. The conflict here is defined by **"resource nationalism"**—the conviction that the province's vast natural wealth is being extracted to benefit the "core" (Punjab and Karachi) while the "sons of the soil" live in a state of primitive underdevelopment (Siddiqi, 2012).

The symbolic heart of this grievance is the Sui gas field. Discovered in 1952, Balochistan's gas fueled the industrialization of Punjab and provided energy to the homes of Islamabad for decades, yet many districts in Balochistan, including the area surrounding the gas fields, did not receive gas connections until the 1990s

or later. Today, this grievance has shifted to the **Gwadar Port** and the **China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**. Local Baloch populations fear "demographic engineering," citing projections that an influx of outside labor could turn the Baloch into a minority in their own province.

Economic Indicator (Estimated)	Balochistan	National Average
Literacy Rate	40%	60%
Access to Clean Water	25%	40%
Population Below Poverty Line	52%	33%
Share of Federal PSDP (avg)	10%	N/A

The state's response to these economic and political demands has historically been securitized. The use of military force, the "enforced disappearances" of political activists, and the suspension of civil liberties have radicalized a new generation of Baloch youth. Integration in Balochistan is no longer just about building roads; it is about restoring **dignity and ownership** over local resources.

4.3 Pashtun Identity and Rights-Based Mobilization

Pashtun identity politics has undergone a profound transformation since 1947. In the early decades, Pashtun nationalism was often articulated through the lens of "Pashtunistan"—a secessionist or autonomist movement that looked toward Afghanistan. However, since the 1980s and the influx of Afghan refugees, the Pashtun elite has become deeply integrated into the Pakistani state's economic and military fabric.

The latest phase of Pashtun mobilization, epitomized by the **Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM)**, represents a shift from ethnic separatism to **rights-based constitutionalism**. The PTM does not demand a separate state; instead, it demands that the Pakistani state adhere to its own constitution. Their grievances are rooted in the fallout of the "War on Terror":

- **Accountability:** Demanding an end to extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances.
- **Security:** The removal of landmines in the former tribal areas (merged districts).
- **Civilian Supremacy:** A call for the de-militarization of civilian spaces in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

By framing their struggle within the language of the 1973 Constitution, these movements represent a sophisticated attempt at integration. They are signaling that they want *to be* Pakistani, provided that the state fulfills its role as a protector of civil rights. The state's tendency to label such rights-based movements as "foreign-funded" or "anti-state" illustrates the persistent gap between the center's security-centric view of integration and the periphery's democratic-centric view.

5. Religion and Sectarianism

While Islam was envisioned as Pakistan's unifying force—the "social glue" that would bind disparate ethnic groups into a singular Muslim nation—its systemic politicization has paradoxically fragmented the very society it was meant to integrate. The state's attempt to use religion as a homogenizing tool failed to account for the internal pluralism within the faith itself. State-sponsored Islamization during the Zia-ul-Haq era (1977–1988) represents the most critical juncture in this process. By privileging a narrow, orthodox Sunni interpretation of Sharia, the state effectively marginalized Shias, Ahmadis, and non-Muslim minorities, transforming religious belief into a tool for political exclusion and legal discrimination (Nasr, 2000).

This period saw the rise of the *Sipah-e-Sahaba* and other militant groups, as sectarian identity became a primary political marker, shaping electoral behavior, local patronage networks, and even recruitment into the lower tiers of the civil bureaucracy. The "Sunnification" of the state apparatus created a hierarchy of citizenship, where one's proximity to the state's preferred theological brand determined their access to justice and security. In cities like Karachi and Jhang, sectarian affiliation superseded national identity, leading to cycles of tit-for-tat violence that eroded the social fabric. Rather than unifying a diverse populace, the state's religious

engineering weakened national cohesion by replacing broad-based Muslim nationalism with narrow, exclusionary sectarianism.

6. The Political Economy of Identity

Economic inequality in Pakistan is not merely a matter of class; it is deeply geographic and ethnic, which directly reinforces identity politics. Uneven development and skewed resource distribution create powerful perceptions of internal colonialism and exploitation, particularly in peripheral regions like Balochistan, Interior Sindh, and Southern Punjab. When the state fails to provide basic services in these areas while extracting their natural resources, identity becomes the primary language of economic protest. Fiscal mechanisms like the National Finance Commission (NFC) Award have thus become the ultimate battlegrounds for federalism.

While the landmark 7th NFC Award (2010) was a major step forward—expanding the distribution criteria beyond simple population to include poverty, revenue collection, and inverse population density—serious implementation challenges persist. The federal government's inability to meet tax collection targets often results in "budgetary strangulation" for the provinces, fueling the narrative that the center is deliberately underfunding regional development. Contemporary projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) further illustrate this friction; they are frequently interpreted through ethnic lenses. Without transparent, inclusive planning and a visible "share" for local communities in Gwadar or the former FATA, even massive growth-oriented projects risk exacerbating identity-based conflict rather than resolving it.

7. State Institutions and Identity Management

7.1 Military Dominance

The military's central role in Pakistan's political architecture has promoted a predominantly security-centric approach to national integration. Under this paradigm, ethnic mobilization and demands for provincial autonomy are often framed as existential threats to the state or "foreign-funded" conspiracies rather than legitimate political issues. This securitization of identity limits the space for civilian-led dialogue and reinforces a sense of alienation, particularly in Balochistan and the former FATA regions. When the state responds to political grievances with "enforced disappearances" or military operations, it validates the narrative of sub-nationalist insurgents, making a negotiated political settlement increasingly difficult.

7.2 Judiciary and Federalism

The judiciary has historically functioned as a double-edged sword in the context of national integration. For decades, the superior courts legitimized centralized, often authoritarian, authority through the "Doctrine of Necessity," providing legal cover for the suspension of the federal constitution. While recent judicial activism has occasionally addressed provincial rights and human rights abuses, institutional inconsistency has limited its integrative impact. The lack of a stable, predictable legal framework for federal disputes means that provinces often view the courts as an extension of the central state's power rather than a neutral arbiter of the social contract.

8. Federalism and the 18th Constitutional Amendment

The 18th Amendment, passed in 2010, marked a definitive turning point in Pakistan's constitutional history by fundamentally rebalancing power between the center and the provinces. By devolving a vast array of powers, abolishing the Concurrent List, and granting provinces control over their natural resources, the amendment addressed long-standing grievances that had simmered since 1947. It was an attempt to strengthen democratic federalism by ensuring that the "periphery" had a stake in its own governance. However, the amendment remains under pressure. Narratives advocating for its rollback frequently emerge from the center, couched in the language of "national efficiency" and fiscal necessity. This ongoing tension reflects the deep-seated struggle between those who view Pakistan as a unitary "security state" and those who envision it as an inclusive, decentralized federation.

9. Comparative Perspective: Pakistan, India, and Malaysia

A comparative analysis highlights the specific paths Pakistan avoided. India, despite its

immense diversity, managed to accommodate ethnic and linguistic friction early on through linguistic federalism (the 1956 reorganization of states), which gave major linguistic groups their own political space within the union. Similarly, Malaysia institutionalized ethnic bargaining through a clear, albeit controversial, social contract (the *Bumiputera* policy) that balanced the economic interests of the Chinese minority with the political dominance of the Malay majority. In contrast, Pakistan's historical reluctance to formally recognize and institutionalize its diversity has left its integration project incomplete. By attempting to force a monolithic identity on a pluralistic society, the Pakistani state has often invited the very fragmentation it sought to prevent, highlighting the absolute necessity of institutionalized pluralism for post-colonial stability.

10. Toward an Inclusive Model of National Integration

Sustainable national integration in Pakistan requires a comprehensive move away from coercion and toward a model of **"Pluralistic Citizenship."** This must involve:

1. **Constitutional Sincerity:** Protecting the 18th Amendment and ensuring that the Senate—the house of the federating units—has equal financial powers to the National Assembly.
2. **Linguistic Recognition:** Formally recognizing regional languages like Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, and Punjabi as national languages to end the perception of cultural marginalization.
3. **Economic Equity:** Implementing a "bottom-up" development model where local communities are the primary beneficiaries of resource extraction.
4. **Democratic Consolidation:** Allowing local government elections to happen regularly to decentralize power beyond provincial capitals to the grassroots.
5. **Depoliticization of Religion:** Returning to Jinnah's vision of a state that is neutral in matters of faith, ensuring that religious identity is a private matter and not a prerequisite for political rights.

11. Conclusion

Pakistan's crisis of national integration is not an inevitable byproduct of its diverse ethnic makeup, but rather the calculated result of centralized state-building, the politicization of identities for elite gain, and systemic institutional exclusion. The history of 1971 serves as a grim reminder that national unity cannot be imposed through the barrel of a gun or the imposition of a single ideology; it must be constantly negotiated through the inclusive mechanisms of democracy, federalism, and equitable development. The transition from a "security state" that fears its own people to a "developmental state" that empowers them is the only viable path forward. By transforming diversity from a perceived source of conflict into a foundation for social and economic cohesion, Pakistan can finally achieve the stability that has eluded it for over seven decades.

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