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Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**Revisiting National Identity: Contemporary Shifts in Pakistan's Socio-Political Narrative****Jawad Hussain**

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Department of History, University of Karachi[wmuradchang@gmail.com](mailto:wmuradchang@gmail.com)**ABSTRACT**

*This article examines the ongoing evolution and contestation of national identity in Pakistan, tracing its historical foundations in the Two-Nation Theory and subsequent transformations through Islamization, securitization, and elite-driven narrative construction. It analyzes persistent tensions between a centralized Islamic framework and the realities of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, exacerbated by key crises such as the 1971 secession, Zia-era reforms, and post-9/11 security paradigms. Focusing on contemporary shifts from 2018 to 2025, the study explores how political polarization, social media proliferation, globalization, economic crises, and demographic pressures have accelerated the fragmentation of traditional identity constructs while fostering hybrid and inclusive counter-narratives. Through qualitative discourse analysis and interpretive case studies, it highlights the socio-political implications of deepened institutional distrust, risks to cohesion, and emerging calls for pluralistic reimagining's. Ultimately, the article argues that Pakistan stands at a pivotal moment where embracing diversity through secular-inclusive or federated models offers the most viable pathway toward renewed national resilience and democratic stability.*

**Keywords:** National Identity, Pakistan, Two-Nation Theory, Islamization, Ethnic Diversity, Political Polarization.

**Introduction**

Pakistan's national identity emerged from the 1947 Partition, anchored in the Two-Nation Theory, which asserted that Muslims and Hindus constituted distinct nations due to irreconcilable religious, cultural, and social differences. Articulated prominently by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, this ideology positioned Islam as the primary unifying force for the subcontinent's Muslims, culminating in the demand for a separate homeland to safeguard their political and cultural autonomy from perceived Hindu Majoritarianism. The theory's intellectual roots trace back to reformers like Syed Ahmad Khan, who emphasized Muslim distinctiveness in the modern colonial context, and Allama Iqbal, who envisioned a consolidated Muslim polity in northwest India. However, the 1971 secession of East Pakistan underscored the theory's limitations, as linguistic and ethnic grievances overrode religious solidarity, exposing the challenges of imposing a singular Islamic narrative on diverse populations (Jawad & Shabbir, 2025).

Persistent contestations over identity markers religion, ethnicity, language, and culture have intensified amid recurring political instability, military dominance, and ethnic diversity. While the state has historically prioritized a centralized Islamic framework, often reinforced

through securitization policies, sub-national assertions in regions like Balochistan and Sindh highlight grievances over resource distribution, autonomy, and cultural marginalization. Baloch nationalist movements, for instance, have challenged the dominant narrative by emphasizing tribal and regional identities against perceived Punjabi-centric control, reflecting deeper fissures in federal cohesion (Siddiqi, 2012). Military interventions and elite-driven constructs have further perpetuated a security-oriented identity, prioritizing ontological stability through external threat perceptions, particularly toward India, while suppressing alternative ethnic discourses (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024).

In the 2020s, contemporary shifts have been propelled by globalization, social media proliferation, a dominant youth demographic, economic turmoil, and heightened political polarization. With approximately 66.9 million social media users by early 2025, digital platforms have amplified hybrid identities and youth-driven activism, fostering greater political awareness and polarization among young Pakistanis (Kemp, 2025; Maqsood et al., 2024). Economic crises, including inflation peaking at 38% in 2023 before declining to around 4.5% in 2024-25, have fueled disillusionment and emigration, eroding trust in traditional state narratives (State Bank of Pakistan, 2024). Political turmoil surrounding the 2024 elections, allegations of rigging, and the ongoing imprisonment of former Prime Minister Imran Khan have deepened divisions, with populist anti-establishment rhetoric resonating strongly among the youth bulge (International Crisis Group, 2024).

This article examines recent socio-political narratives reshaping Pakistan's national identity, including elite-military constructs, ethnic resurgence in provinces like Balochistan and Sindh, and external influences from globalization and digital spheres. It interrogates the interplay between institutional challenges and evolving public discourses. Pakistan endures a profound identity crisis rooted in postcolonial contradictions, unresolved federal tensions, and dominant elite narratives; nevertheless, pathways toward a pluralistic, inclusive identity embracing ethnic diversity, youth aspirations, and equitable governance hold promise for fostering renewed national cohesion and democratic resilience (Jawad & Shabbir, 2025).

### **Literature Review**

The theoretical foundations for understanding national identity in Pakistan draw heavily from Benedict Anderson's seminal concept of "imagined communities," where nations are socially constructed entities imagined through shared narratives, print media, and collective rituals, fostering a sense of horizontal comradeship despite internal diversity (Anderson, 2006). In the Pakistani context, this framework illuminates how the Two-Nation Theory imagined a Muslim homeland distinct from Hindu India, yet struggled to sustain unity amid linguistic and ethnic variances. Complementing Anderson, constructivist approaches in nationalism emphasize identity as fluid and elite-driven, shaped by political exigencies rather than primordial ties (Siddiqi, 2022). Discourse-historical methods further dissect how state narratives historically privilege certain markers religion over ethnicity through official texts and speeches, perpetuating hegemonic constructions while marginalizing alternatives (Azam & Bilal, 2024).

Historical scholarship underscores Pakistan's identity contestation, particularly the 1971 secession of Bangladesh, which exposed the inadequacy of religious solidarity alone in binding diverse populations, prompting a reevaluation of elite-fabricated narratives reliant on Islam for cohesion (Jalal, 1995). General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies in the late 1970s and 1980s intensified this, institutionalizing orthodox interpretations through legal reforms, educational curricula, and media to counter perceived secular threats and legitimize military

rule (Haqqani, 2005). These efforts, often framed as restoring ideological purity post-1971, reinforced a centralized Islamic identity but exacerbated sectarian and ethnic divides, as elites manipulated religious discourse for ontological security amid governance failures (Anwar et al., 2025).

Post-2000 studies highlight ethnic politics as a counterforce to monolithic narratives, with regional assertions in provinces like Balochistan and Sindh challenging securitized state discourses that prioritize external threats over internal pluralism (Siddiqi, 2012). Media's evolving role, from traditional outlets propagating official heroism to emerging platforms amplifying sub-national voices, has fragmented identity constructions (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). Securitization theories reveal how ontological security imperatives drive state rhetoric, framing dissent as existential risks, thereby sustaining military influence and suppressing federal accommodations (International Crisis Group, 2024).

Recent 2020s publications address shifting cultural influences, including declining Arabization legacies from Zia-era policies and rising Turkification trends via popular media, which hybridize identity amid globalization (Quraishi & Bazai, 2025). Digital activism has surged, with youth leveraging platforms for political expression, intersecting religion with demands for accountability and pluralism (Maqsood et al., 2024; Safdar, 2025). These works explore how religion increasingly intersects with sub-national aspirations, fostering multi-layered identities that blend faith with regional grievances (Iftikhar & Shafique, 2025). Notwithstanding these advances, significant gaps persist in the literature, particularly limited empirical focus on post-2018 dynamics involving youth demographics, social media's transformative role in activism, and evolving ethnic assertions amid political polarization (Azam & Bilal, 2024). While historical and securitization analyses abound, contemporary shifts driven by digital spheres and generational disillusionment remain underexplored, necessitating deeper investigation into how these forces reshape inclusive narratives beyond elite-military dominance (Kemp, 2025).

### **Statement Problem**

Pakistan's national identity, envisioned as a cohesive Islamic homeland grounded in the Two-Nation Theory, has faced persistent crisis since independence due to the inherent contradiction between a centralized religious-ideological framework and the country's profound ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity. Historical efforts to impose unitary narratives through Islamization and securitization have repeatedly failed to bridge regional disparities and sub-national aspirations, as evidenced by the traumatic secession of East Pakistan and subsequent cycles of elite-driven narrative engineering aimed at securing ontological stability amid governance failures. In the contemporary era, particularly from 2018 onward, accelerating political polarization, rapid digital globalization, economic precarity, and a dominant youth demographic have intensified disillusionment with traditional constructs, exposing their inadequacy in addressing lived realities of pluralism and equitable citizenship. This deepening fragmentation threatens social cohesion, institutional legitimacy, and democratic resilience, underscoring the urgent need to reexamine and reconfigure national identity narratives toward greater inclusivity and federal accommodation.

### **Objectives**

1. To trace the evolution of Pakistan's national identity from ideological (Islamic homeland) to contested multi-layered constructs.

2. To analyze contemporary drivers of shifts, including political instability, military-elite narratives, ethnic resurgence, and global/digital influences.
3. To examine the socio-political implications of these shifts on cohesion, governance, and stability.
4. To explore potential for inclusive narratives that accommodate diversity while maintaining unity.
5. To propose recommendations for reimagining national identity in a modern context.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design, primarily relying on critical discourse analysis to examine the construction and contestation of national identity narratives in Pakistan. The analysis focuses on a purposive selection of primary sources, including official state documents, political speeches by key leaders across civilian and military spheres from 2018 to 2025, national curriculum textbooks, and mainstream media editorials representing diverse ideological positions. These texts are interrogated for recurring themes, rhetorical strategies, and power dynamics that privilege certain identity markers such as religion and security while marginalizing ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity. Thematic coding is applied systematically to identify shifts in narrative framing, particularly how elite-driven constructs respond to contemporary socio-political pressures, including economic instability and generational demands for inclusivity.

Complementing the discourse analysis, the methodology incorporates interpretive case studies of significant post-2018 events that have influenced identity debates, such as electoral controversies, constitutional amendments, and provincial assertions of autonomy. Secondary data from credible reports by international and domestic think tanks, along with aggregated insights from public opinion surveys on identity perceptions, provide contextual triangulation. The approach remains interpretive rather than positivist, acknowledging the researcher's position within the broader scholarly discourse on postcolonial state formation. Limitations include the predominant focus on urban and elite-produced texts due to accessibility constraints, potentially underrepresenting rural and grassroots voices, though efforts are made to balance this through inclusive thematic exploration.

### **Historical Foundations and Persistent Contestation**

Pakistan's foundational national identity narratives originated in Muhammad Ali Jinnah's pragmatic vision of a homeland for South Asian Muslims, emphasizing political autonomy and cultural distinctiveness rather than theocratic governance, as evidenced in his August 11, 1947, address advocating religious freedom and equality irrespective of faith, caste, or creed (Anwar et al., 2025). This secular-leaning construct, rooted in the Two-Nation Theory, positioned Islam as a mobilization tool against perceived Hindu dominance rather than a prescriptive ideological blueprint for statecraft. However, post-1947 developments markedly diverged, with successive regimes and military interventions reshaping identity through intensified Islamization, culminating in elite-driven efforts to forge cohesion amid linguistic and regional fragmentation. The military's emergent role as ideological custodian transformed identity construction into a securitized enterprise, prioritizing unitary Islamic framing over Jinnah's pluralistic inclinations (Hoodbhoy, 2023).

Key crises profoundly disrupted these narratives, exposing the limitations of religion as a singular binding force. The 1971 secession of East Pakistan, resulting in Bangladesh's independence, starkly illustrated the failure of religious unity to transcend ethnic and linguistic grievances, as Bengali demands for cultural recognition and economic equity

overwhelmed Islamabad's centralized Islamic rhetoric. This traumatic dismemberment prompted a compensatory intensification of Islamization under General Zia-ul-Haq, whose regime institutionalized Arab-influenced orthodox reforms through legal, educational, and media mechanisms to reconstitute ontological stability post-loss. Post-9/11 securitization further entrenched a defensive identity paradigm, framing external threats particularly from Afghanistan and India as existential challenges necessitating heightened military oversight and religious nationalism to legitimize state authority (Azam & Bilal, 2024; Quraishi & Bazai, 2025).

The intersectionality of identity markers reveals persistent tensions, with religion dominating official discourse yet clashing acutely with ethnic (Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashtun, Baloch) and linguistic diversity. While the state privileges a Sunni-centric Islamic narrative, often aligned with Punjabi cultural hegemony, sub-national assertions underscore resource inequities, autonomy demands, and cultural marginalization, perpetuating fragmentation (Azam & Bilal, 2024). Linguistic pluralism encompassing Urdu's imposed primacy alongside regional languages further complicates cohesion, as historical policies favoring Urdu alienated non-Punjabi groups, reinforcing perceptions of internal colonialism. These intersecting markers generate compounded exclusions, where religious orthodoxy intersects with ethnic hierarchies to sustain power imbalances (Siddiqi, 2025).

Elite fabrication of narratives serves primarily to secure ontological stability amid chronic underperformance in economic delivery, governance efficacy, and human development indices (Khan, 2025). Confronted with persistent disparities and institutional fragility, dominant elite's particularly military-bureaucratic strata construct reified heroic-victimhood discourses, externalizing failures onto perpetual threats while suppressing dissonant evidence through controlled epistemic ecosystems. This deliberate narrative engineering, blending securitization with religious symbolism, mitigates anxiety over biographical incoherence between aspirational Islamic statehood and empirical realities, thereby perpetuating regime legitimacy at the expense of inclusive pluralism (Hoodbhoy, 2023).

### **Contemporary Drivers of Narrative Shifts (2018–2025)**

The period from 2018 to 2025 witnessed profound political polarization reshaping Pakistan's socio-political narratives, largely catalyzed by the ascent and subsequent marginalization of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) under Imran Khan's charismatic populism. Khan's anti-status quo rhetoric, framing entrenched elites and dynastic parties as corrupt impediments to a "Naya Pakistan," mobilized unprecedented youth support, redefining patriotism and accountability in public discourse. This binary construction insiders versus outsiders intensified affective polarization, eroding institutional trust and amplifying perceptions of electoral manipulation following the 2022 no-confidence vote and disputed 2024 polls (Zubair, 2025). Subsequent crackdowns, including mass arrests and symbolic prosecutions, further alienated urban youth, fostering a generational disillusionment that challenged the military-elite hegemonic narrative while exposing vulnerabilities in democratic consolidation (International Crisis Group, 2024).

Social media proliferation and globalization have profoundly hybridized national identity constructs, with over 150 million users by 2025 facilitating digital activism and exposure to transnational cultural flows. Platforms amplified youth-driven critiques of governance, blending local grievances with global aspirations for justice and pluralism, while declining Arabization influences gave way to Turkification trends through popular dramas portraying modern Muslim lifestyles (Rehman, 2025). These serialized narratives, often romanticizing

familial loyalty and secular-leaning modernity, subtly eroded rigid ideological boundaries, promoting hybrid identities that intersect faith with cosmopolitan values amid waning orthodox legacies. Yet, this digital globalization also heightened polarization, as algorithmic echo chambers reinforced partisan divides and external cultural pulls diluted indigenous markers, compelling a reevaluation of cohesive national self-imagery in an interconnected era (Kemp, 2025).

Economic exigencies and demographic pressures, accentuated by a persistent youth bulge comprising nearly two-thirds of the population under 30, have engendered widespread disillusionment with traditional identity constructs, propelling mass emigration and regional assertions. Chronic crises inflation surges, debt burdens, and stagnant job creation exacerbated by post-2022 floods and political instability, drove over 800,000 annual outflows of skilled youth seeking viable futures abroad, symbolizing a collective rejection of state-promised prosperity rooted in ideological unity (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). In provinces like Balochistan and Sindh, resource inequities and autonomy demands intensified ethnic resurgence, challenging centralized narratives through demands for equitable federalism amid security operations. This confluence of demographic momentum and economic precarity underscores a transitional crisis, where unaddressed youth aspirations risk fragmenting national cohesion unless redirected toward inclusive, pluralistic reimagining's (Pasha, 2025).

### **Implications and Emerging Alternatives**

The socio-political ramifications of Pakistan's evolving national identity narratives manifest profoundly in deepened polarization, institutional trust deficits, heightened risks to social cohesion, and linkages to extremism and violence. Acute political divisions, exacerbated by contested elections and elite-military contestations, have eroded public confidence in state apparatuses, fostering a pervasive cynicism that undermines democratic legitimacy (United States Institute of Peace, 2025). This trust erosion, coupled with socioeconomic grievances, creates fertile ground for extremist ideologies, as marginalized segments perceive violence as a viable response to perceived injustices. Narrow interpretations of identity further fuel intolerance toward ethnic and religious minorities, amplifying sectarian tensions and militant recruitment, thereby threatening the fragile fabric of national unity amid recurring cycles of instability (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024).

Media and educational institutions play pivotal roles in perpetuating dominant narratives of victimhood and heroism, often framing Pakistan as besieged by external adversaries and internal betrayals, while emergent counter-discourses advocate inclusive multicultural paradigms. Traditional curricula and mainstream outlets reinforce security-centric heroism tied to religious orthodoxy, marginalizing pluralistic histories and promoting exclusionary themes that sustain ontological anxieties (Azam & Bilal, 2024). Conversely, digital spaces and reformist voices increasingly propel calls for "Indus"-rooted or multicultural narratives, emphasizing pre-Islamic civilizational legacies and ethnic harmony to counter hegemonic constructs. This contestation reflects a transitional phase where entrenched victimhood tropes clash with aspirations for tolerant, diverse self-representation, potentially reshaping public consciousness toward greater inclusivity (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

In the global arena, Pakistan's foreign policy recalibrations deepening strategic entwinement with China via enhanced military and economic corridors, juxtaposed against persistent adversarial framing of India reinforce a security-centric identity paradigm (International Crisis Group, 2024). Alliances with Beijing provide material and diplomatic ballast, sustaining narratives of resilience against perceived encirclement, yet they entrench defensive

postures that prioritize militarized cohesion over internal pluralism. Shifts in regional dynamics, including border frictions and counterterrorism imperatives, perpetuate external threat perceptions as core identity anchors, limiting space for accommodative domestic reforms. This geopolitical orientation, while affording short-term ontological security, risks perpetuating cycles of isolation and internal fragmentation in an increasingly multipolar order (Vivekananda International Foundation, 2025).

Emerging alternatives envision pathways toward secular-inclusive or genuinely federated models that accommodate linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity, offering prospects for resilient cohesion. Secular frameworks advocate decoupling state ideology from religious exclusivity, promoting civic citizenship grounded in equitable rights and pluralistic governance (Azam & Bilal, 2024). Federated approaches emphasize devolved autonomy, resource equity, and constitutional safeguards for provincial identities, potentially mitigating sub-national grievances through inclusive power-sharing. These paradigms, supported by youth-driven digital activism and civil society advocacy, hold transformative potential if institutionalized via educational reforms and inter-elite dialogue, fostering a hybrid identity that balances unity with diversity amid postcolonial legacies (United States Institute of Peace, 2025).

### **Discussion**

Pakistan's national identity remains trapped in a protracted crisis, oscillating between the idealistic promise of a unified Muslim homeland and the intractable realities of ethnic pluralism, linguistic diversity, and persistent elite dominance. The foundational vision of a state where religion served as a political mobilizer rather than a rigid ideological straitjacket has long been overtaken by successive waves of Islamization and securitization that prioritize cohesion through exclusionary narratives. This engineered unity, sustained by military custodianship and bureaucratic control, has repeatedly failed to accommodate the multifaceted identities of its citizens, producing instead a perpetual sense of ontological insecurity. The result is a nation perpetually defining itself against perceived external threats and internal dissent, where the invocation of religious solidarity masks deeper structural failures in governance, economic equity, and federal balance.

Contemporary shifts between 2018 and 2025 have accelerated this fragmentation, driven by unprecedented political polarization, digital globalization, and demographic pressures. The rise of populist challenges to entrenched power structures exposed the fragility of elite consensus, while social media transformed passive youth into active participants in identity discourse, blending global cultural influences with local aspirations for accountability and inclusion. Economic despair and mass emigration among the educated young further eroded faith in traditional constructs of patriotic sacrifice, as citizens increasingly sought dignity and opportunity beyond the state's ideological boundaries. Regional assertions of cultural and resource rights, though often met with securitized responses, revealed the limits of centralized narratives in addressing legitimate grievances rooted in historical marginalization. These converging forces have rendered the old paradigm of a monolithic Islamic identity increasingly untenable in the face of lived diversity.

Yet within this crisis lie seeds of potential renewal. The very fragmentation that threatens cohesion also opens space for reimagining a more pluralistic national self, one that embraces rather than suppresses the richness of its ethnic, linguistic, and cultural mosaic. Emerging calls for inclusive narratives whether framed around shared civilizational heritage, civic citizenship, or genuine federal autonomy reflect a maturing societal desire for an identity that

accommodates difference without sacrificing unity. Achieving this requires courageous elite consensus to devolve power, reform education toward critical pluralism, and foster intergenerational dialogue that prioritizes equitable development over ideological purity. Only by transcending the defensive postures of the past can Pakistan transform its identity crisis into an opportunity for resilient, inclusive nationhood capable of meeting the demands of a rapidly changing world.

### **Recommendations**

1. Pakistan should initiate comprehensive constitutional reforms to strengthen federalism by devolving greater fiscal, administrative, and legislative powers to provinces, ensuring equitable resource distribution and recognition of regional autonomy.
2. The state must undertake systematic curriculum reforms in education to promote pluralistic histories that highlight shared civilizational heritage, ethnic diversity, and civic citizenship while reducing emphasis on exclusionary religious nationalism.
3. Authorities ought to foster inclusive national dialogues involving youth, civil society, and provincial representatives to co-create a renewed social contract that accommodates multiple identity markers beyond religion.
4. The government should regulate digital platforms to curb algorithmic polarization while promoting content that encourages constructive discourse on pluralism and national unity.
5. Policymakers need to prioritize economic policies targeting youth employment, skill development, and equitable growth to restore faith in state institutions and reduce emigration-driven identity disillusionment.
6. The military establishment should progressively withdraw from shaping ideological narratives, confining its role to professional defense duties and supporting civilian-led identity discourse.
7. Pakistan must enact legislation guaranteeing linguistic rights by elevating provincial languages to official status alongside Urdu in respective regions, thereby affirming cultural diversity.
8. The state should establish independent commissions to address historical grievances in marginalized provinces through transparent mechanisms for accountability and reconciliation.
9. Foreign policy orientation ought to diversify beyond security-centric alliances, emphasizing economic diplomacy and cultural exchanges that project a modern, pluralistic national image globally.
10. Political parties and elites should commit to cross-partisan consensus on core identity principles that transcend electoral cycles, institutionalizing inclusive governance as a cornerstone of national resilience.

### **Conclusion**

Pakistan's national identity, conceived as a unifying Islamic homeland amid the traumas of Partition, has endured nearly eight decades of profound contestation, revealing the inherent tensions between ideological aspiration and the realities of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural pluralism. The persistent dominance of elite-military constructs, reinforced through cycles of Islamization and securitization, has offered short-term ontological stability but at the enduring cost of institutional trust, democratic maturation, and genuine federal cohesion. Contemporary developments between 2018 and 2025 marked by intense political polarization, the disruptive force of digital globalization, economic precarity, and assertive



regional voices have exposed the exhaustion of monolithic narratives that privilege religion and security over inclusive citizenship. These shifts, while deepening fragmentation and disillusionment, particularly among a demographically dominant youth seeking dignity and opportunity, simultaneously signal the emergence of a critical juncture where old certainties can no longer contain the multiplicity of lived identities.

The path forward demands a courageous imagination of nationhood that transcends defensive postures and embraces pluralism as a source of strength rather than vulnerability. Inclusive narratives whether rooted in shared civilizational heritage, civic equality, or robust federal autonomy must replace exclusionary tropes of victimhood and heroism if sustainable cohesion is to be achieved. This transformation requires deliberate policy continuity, educational reform toward critical and pluralistic histories, equitable resource distribution, and meaningful intergenerational dialogue that prioritizes human development over ideological purity. By accommodating diversity within a framework of mutual respect and shared prosperity, Pakistan can convert its protracted identity crisis into an opportunity for resilient, forward-looking nationhood capable of navigating the complexities of the twenty-first century with confidence and unity.

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