

# **A LIBERAL-LEFT PERSPECTIVE ON VIOLENCE AGAINST PUNJABI WORKERS IN BALOCHISTAN: NARRATIVE SHIFT SINCE OCTOBER 7, 2023**

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## **Abstract**

Social scientists believe that liberalism and its projects are one of the finest value systems of the modern world, which ceases the space for political creativity. The conduct of Pakistani liberal activists has changed drastically since October 7, particularly in how they interact when their interests are not at risk. Liberal-left declares Punjabis as an extension of the state, allegedly subjecting Balochistan to discrimination. This paper studies the directives of the liberal regime since October 7, taking a supposed stand with banned militant outfits, overlooking the violence against Punjabis in Balochistan.

**Keywords:** Liberalism, Human Rights Regime, Punjab, Punjabi Labourers, Balochistan.

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## **Introduction**

October 7 has become a standard to judge moral and political developments across the globe. The Pakistani-left, which has historically opposed the use of violence, militancy, and religious causes, has seemingly shifted its strategy. Hamas has gained worldwide moral support, especially evident in the West; whereas, the Pakistani-left has always criticized the support for such causes. The liberal-left, which mobilized against Taliban intervention, appears to assume an unconventional stance over the Baloch Liberation Army and affiliated groups. Some point out this justification as both actors – BLA and liberal-left draw their ideological inspiration from secular liberal beliefs. The liberal-left is accused of justifying violence by arguing that it is an organic outcome of systemic oppression and the failure of nonviolent actions. They believe that oppressive systems are protected by those in authority, who employ coercion to maintain their dominance. Similar arguments are witnessed when Baloch insurgents use violence as a coercive tool against low-income Punjabi workers. These insurgents have not only resorted to violence against the Punjabi populace but have also used intimidating tactics to compromise the loyalties of Baloch citizens.

Discourse analysis provides insights into studying the spontaneous addition of various terms, equating the Palestinian cause. The Balochistan problem is being phrased in various terms such as genocide, settler colonialism, Zionists, or supremacists. This phrasing of language is not only being materialized against the Punjabi populace, but violence in the guise of resistance is being enabled against low-income workers, especially from Punjab, who are seen as representatives of a supposedly oppressive state and plunderers of resources. In past, the Taliban had been phrased in similar manners by the conservative-right as *mujahid* and ‘just combatants’ who have now assumed the shape of violent Afghan nationalism against Pakistan.

The liberal and human rights regime in Pakistan refers to a governance and networking framework that strives for the Western democratic model and universal human rights, often analogizing alien values to a differently evolved system. The liberal-left is a fluid concept in Pakistan, with socialist and communist aspects that compete with the conservative-religious front

with calls for progressive values and traces of ethnic nationalism. It is a fusion of colonialism, Western democratic model, human rights, and liberal ideas.<sup>1</sup>

Some activists perceive violence as inevitable to bring attention to the problem, meanwhile others criticize them for excluding the low-income workers from their human rights advocacy. As far as liberalism is concerned, it represents a specific perspective; to some extent, this assertion is expressed in civil rights, but its instrumentalist considerations differ from reality.

There has been a shift in activism over the binary of terrorism and adequate justification of Hamas by comparing it to the BLA. Numerous attacks have been carried out by the Baloch insurgents, with some being claimed and others remaining ambiguous, targeting Punjabi workers with similar patterns recorded in the past.

Despite being the largest province with 44% land and the least population 6.02%,<sup>2</sup> Balochistan has always been the discourse on resources manipulation and human rights violations; inviting military establishment and separatist groups followed by external proxies as main actors of the conflict. The unrest is a contribution of political instability, economic conditions, militancy, and foreign proxies, which continuously manifest in problems for the federation. The arrest of an Indian agent Kulbhushan Yadav is one of the recent pieces of evidence of India's involvement in creating a continuous hoax in the province. Various narratives represent each actor's outlook on the conflict. Some focus on how the military establishment perceives the role of local *Sardars* in perpetuating the grievances as evidenced by uprisings in 1948 and 1973.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, nationalists and separatists perceive the state as deliberately exploiting their resources.

## **Research Questions & Objectives**

- How has the Pakistani liberal regime's narrative evolved since October 7?

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<sup>1</sup> Makau Wa Mutua, "The Ideology of Human Rights," in *International Law of Human Rights* (Routledge, 2017), 103–72; John Charvet and Elisa Kaczynska-Nay, *The Liberal Project and Human Rights: The Theory and Practice of a New World Order* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> The Planning and Development Department Govt. of Balochistan, "Balochistan Comprehensive Development and Growth Strategy (BCDGS) 2021 – 2026," June 5, 2023, <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-06/bcdgs-2021-2026.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Abdul Basit Khan, Muhammad Azhar, and Ayaz Muhammad, "International Factors' Held in Bahauddin Zakariya University," n.d.

- How violence against low-income workers is dismissed?
- *To analyze the narrative shift in Pakistani-liberal regime, witnessed since October 7, which draws equivalence between Hamas and the BLA and provides justification for their violent actions.*
- *To study patterns and causes of violence against Punjabi workers.*

## **Research Methodology**

The research applies a qualitative research method to examine the perspectives around violence against Punjabi workers by focusing on the ideological stance of the Pakistani liberal-left. The research design introduces both secondary and primary data collection methods. The primary data is collected via a focused group discussion while the secondary data is obtained from books, research papers, news articles, and web sources.

## **Focus Group Discussion**

The focus group discussion comprised thirty-three participants, selected based on their alignment with liberal-left inclination, Indigenous rights research, and academic background, specifically their experience in activism and research on Balochistan. The discussion was moderated by the researcher to enable a comprehensive dialogue, which was completed in three different rounds between thirty-three participants. Three topics were discussed i.e., influence of Western activism, violence against the Punjabi workers, and equivalence between Hamas and BLA.

## **Conceptual Framework**

The intersection of social (or ethnic) identities leads to biases and violence against supposedly privileged groups.<sup>4</sup> This dehumanization stems from the assumption that Punjab manipulates the resources of Balochistan, while the Punjabis being the majority enjoy the privileges – a claim compounded by the left and criticism around the NFC Award, which divided

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<sup>4</sup>Kimberle Crenshaw, “Stanford Law Review Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Source: Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, 1991.

resources based on the population.<sup>5</sup> These claims have been exploited by the ethno-nationalists or liberal-left and are being materialized against low-income Punjabi workers.

Human rights organizations are seen as capable of providing universal policy assistance; however, this perception has not always matched reality.<sup>6</sup> It is often perceived that human rights activism adheres to refraining from political bias which undermines its moral integrity; although, they are often accused of relative standards.

## **Literature Review**

Liberalism is sought as a political expression of evangelism, a memory of crusades; lost and won.<sup>7</sup> Whereas the human rights regime is viewed as a political project of universal Western ideals to enforce moral good. Its legitimacy seems irrefutable due to Western democratic model as its derivative.<sup>8</sup> Just as liberal ideas of Western democracy claim universality, the human rights regime is also viewed as definitive savant.

Liberal activism is sought as a catalyst of change, peace, and economic mobilization.<sup>9</sup> It is often applauded for reformation; however, the need to bring economic mobilization and social change often overlooks the reasons behind the absence of peace or economic prosperity in neo-colonial nation-states.<sup>10</sup> The evidence indicates a connection between the colonial past and the present.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Pakistan Energy Year Book, "Contested Natural Resources--Access and Benefit Sharing," *{Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews* 11, no. 4 (n.d.): 654–71.

<sup>6</sup>Morten Broberg and Hans-Otto Sano, "Strengths and Weaknesses in a Human Rights-Based Approach to International Development – an Analysis of a Rights-Based Approach to Development Assistance Based on Practical Experiences," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 22, no. 5 (May 28, 2018): 664–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2017.1408591>.

<sup>7</sup>Jack Donnelly, *The Relative Universality of Human Rights (Revised)*, "Human Rights & Human Welfare 6, No. 1 (2006), vol. 6 (Human Rights & Human Welfare, 2006).

<sup>8</sup>Charles Larmore, *The Moral Basis of Political Liberalism* (Routledge, 2017).

<sup>9</sup>Alexandra Gheciu, "Liberalism and Peaceful Change," *The Oxford Handbook of Peaceful Change in International Relations*, 2022, 111–27.

<sup>10</sup> Dr. Elianne El @twitchy.witch Amyouni, "We Need to Begin Envisioning a World Beyond Our Own," Instagram Reel, March 4, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C4HDkcgOSdi/?igsh=MXQ4b2cycjA5eHp5Mg%3D%3D>.

<sup>11</sup>Aneira J. Edmunds, "The Colonialism of Human Rights: Ongoing Hypocrisies of Western Liberalism," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44, no. 8 (June 21, 2021): 1415–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2020.1842479>.

Liberal intellectuals stress on progressive legislation, responding to the contemporary demands;<sup>12</sup> however, it is essential to evaluate the results of such change. In this manner, progress in education and women's empowerment has convened a correlation with economic growth; yet the underlying structures of patriarchy have not changed in favour of women's emancipation.<sup>13</sup>

Activism is shaped by time and space factors, political structures, and cultural norms.<sup>14</sup> October 7 developments have unfolded the failure of universally celebrated democratic principles and liberal values,<sup>15</sup> while human rights regimes are many times meant to surveil neo-colonial states.<sup>16</sup>

Activism has evolved, accommodating rational decisions and, at times, *bounded* rationality.<sup>17</sup> Should activism lack tangible efforts, it transforms into a performance. To accelerate support for a militant organization, resorting to violence against civilians, the liberal regime is accused of dehumanizing unarmed Punjabi workers.

With a population of 110 million and an area of 205,344 sq km,<sup>18</sup> Punjabis draw a numerical majority in population and national services.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, Balochistan, the largest province with an area of 347,190 sq km, has a substantially smaller population of 12.34 million.<sup>20</sup> The first blame associated with Punjab comes from natural gas reserves. The energy consumption of Pakistan is 39.4 million tons, with gas accounting for 40.3% of the total. The total natural gas reserves in Pakistan are 53 trillion cubic feet, of which Balochistan holds 19.3 trillion cubic feet. Since the discovery of natural gas reserves in Balochistan, tensions between the state and

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<sup>12</sup>Furrahk Abbas et al., "HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF PUNJABI LANGUAGE IN PRE-/POST-INDEPENDENCE PAKISTAN AND THE FUTURE PREDICTIONS 825 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF PUNJABI LANGUAGE IN PRE-/ POST-INDEPENDENCE PAKISTAN AND THE FUTURE PREDICTIONS," 2020.

<sup>13</sup>Andrey. Shastri, "Human Rights for Women's Development in Multidimensional: A Step towards Gender Equality in Education.," *Utamax: Journal of Ultimate Research and Trends in Education* 1, no. 2 (2019).

<sup>14</sup>Valentine M Moghadam, *Varieties of Feminist Activism* (Routledge, 2022).

<sup>15</sup> Ahmed Naous J, "The Myth of Western Humanity," Medium, November 23, 2023, <https://medium.com/@ahmadjnaous/the-myth-of-western-humanity-5d2b8f2d7410>.

<sup>16</sup>Jackie Smith, *Social Movements for Global Democracy* (JHU, 2008).

<sup>17</sup>James B Rule, "Rationality and Non-Rationality in Militant Collective Action," *Sociological Theory* 7, no. 2 (1989): 145–60.

<sup>18</sup> Government of Punjab, "Stats Punjab Portal.," accessed June 6, 2024, [https://punjab.gov.pk/punjab\\_quick\\_stats](https://punjab.gov.pk/punjab_quick_stats).

<sup>19</sup>Tariq Rahman, "Soft Power of Punjabi: Language in the Domain of Pleasure," 2017.

<sup>20</sup>Government of Balochistan, "Quick Stats," accessed June 6, 2024, <https://balochistan.gov.pk/quick-stats>.

insurgents began.<sup>21</sup> Punjab, being the largest province, its population and industry consumes gas more than others.<sup>22</sup> Punjab and Sindh produce gas as well where natural reserves were discovered later; however, the gas sold by Balochistan was done at subsidized rates settled in 1953, which required resettlements.<sup>23</sup> The Aghaz E Huqooq E Balochistan package called for the payment of remaining gas royalties from 1954 and 1991 equating Rs120 billion.<sup>24</sup>

It is suggested that upon the discovery of natural gas in Balochistan, the Baloch insurgency began, during which 50, 000 Baloch tribesmen took up arms against the state under the authority of some local *Sardars*. This insurgency was successfully suppressed by the state troops.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, it is important to realize that ethno-nationalism is a product of secular and communist tendencies that feared the Islamic status of the newly created state, a sentiment still apparent in contemporary Pakistan.<sup>26</sup>

### **Unrest and Violence: Incidents Targeting Punjabi Workers**

Insurgency challenges the writ of the state, triggering national security and sovereignty, often morally backed by the liberal-left in neo-colonial nations,<sup>27</sup> which raises questions of human rights violations.<sup>28</sup> Militants see Punjabi workers as extensions of the state, possessing no systematic privileges, often assumed of them.<sup>29</sup> Considering Balochistan's issue only as a conflict between the state and common Baloch deceives one into believing that no other hostile actors are involved, thereby consciously exploiting the situation and denying the available solutions to the problem. The dehumanization of civilians and perceiving their loss as mere collateral damage

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<sup>21</sup>Meezan Z Khwaja, Abid Q Suleri, and Babar Shahbaz, "Natural Resource Allocation in Balochistan and NWFP: Reasons for Discontent," 2009, [www.sdpi.org](http://www.sdpi.org).

<sup>22</sup>Pakistan Energy Year Book, "Contested Natural Resources—Access and Benefit Sharing," *{Renewable and Sustainable Energy Reviews* 11, no. 4 (n.d.): 654–71.

<sup>23</sup>Khwaja, Suleri, and Shahbaz, "Natural Resource Allocation in Balochistan and NWFP: Reasons for Discontent."

<sup>24</sup>Maliha Tariq, "Conflict in Balochistan: Natural Resources and the Way Forward," 2013.

<sup>25</sup>Tariq.

<sup>26</sup>Mehmood Ul Hassan et al., "Comparative Study of the Attitudes of Rural and Urban Punjabi Society towards Caste Stereotypes in Punjabi Language," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 6, no. 1S1 (January 1, 2015): 620–26, <https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2015.v6n1s1p620>.

<sup>27</sup>Radu Michael, *The New Insurgencies: Anti-Communist Guerrillas in the Third World.*, 1990.

<sup>28</sup>Alexander Dugin, *The Fourth Political Theory Eurasian Movement*, 2012.

<sup>29</sup>Deedag Baloch, "Punjabi Mazdoorun ke Lawaqeen ka Sawal," May 12, 2024, [https://twitter.com/I\\_DeedaghBaloch/status/xxxxxx](https://twitter.com/I_DeedaghBaloch/status/xxxxxx).

suggests that these individuals—whether local Balochs or Punjabi workers—are insignificant. Neglecting ethnically motivated killings of labourers indicate certain classes' outlook towards lower-wage workers as well. This denial implies that humility should not be extended to these individuals only due to their ethnic or provincial identity, based on perceptions of power attached to them. The killing of Punjabi workers, which has not yet attracted attention from communist or intersectional feminist actors, raises serious questions about selective activism. The blatant silence has not only justified violence but has also fostered negative perceptions of the Punjabi populace. An activist from Gujrat, stressed that left-leaning groups and figures take honour in labour rights and social movements; yet, they decided to aim their face away from the plight of Punjabi workers, and failed to recognize how militants serve as tools for feudal lords, lurking as the forces of resistance.<sup>30</sup>

On May 29, 2024, a bus travelling from Turbat to Quetta faced an accident, resulting in the deaths of 28 passengers.<sup>31</sup> The Baloch Yakjehtee Committee blamed the bus accident on state negligence, referring to the government's inability to develop infrastructure in Balochistan.<sup>32</sup> However, critics argue that Baloch militants consistently obstruct infrastructural development that contributes to the provincial economy such as gas pipelines, communication towers, railways, and power grids. In 2004, there were 627 missile attacks of which 380 were directed at the Sui gas pipelines and the other targeted railways and highways.<sup>33</sup> Militants and the political wings of terrorist outfits have mobilized against developmental projects in Balochistan, subsequently utilizing this opposition as a weapon to accuse the state for dispossessing Balochistan's development. In past, Baloch insurgents were mainly known for sabotaging gas pipelines. In 2009

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<sup>30</sup> Focus Group Discussion, Understanding Violence Against Punjabi Workers and Claims of Settlements, March 3, 2024.

<sup>31</sup> Abid Hussain, "At Least 28 Killed After Bus Falls into Ravine in Pakistan's Balochistan <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/5/29/at-least-28-killed-after-bus-falls-into-ravine-in-pakistans-balochistan>," *Al-Jazeera*, May 29, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/5/29/at-least-28-killed-after-bus-falls-into-ravine-in-pakistans-balochistan>.

<sup>32</sup> Mahrang Baloch, "MahrangBaloch\_ (Mahrang Baloch). 'Road Accident in Turbat' X (Formerly Twitter), May 29, 2024. [https://x.com/MahrangBaloch\\_/status/1795736099219726476](https://x.com/MahrangBaloch_/status/1795736099219726476)," May 29, 2024, [https://x.com/MahrangBaloch\\_/status/1795736099219726476](https://x.com/MahrangBaloch_/status/1795736099219726476).

<sup>33</sup> Muhammad Muzaffar, Imran Khan, and Zahid Yaseen, "Issues and Conflicts in Balochistan: Implications for Pakistan," *Journal of Political Studies* 28, no. 1 (2021): 43–54.



alone, there were sixty-eight attacks on gas pipelines. A resurgence of such attacks occurred in 2014, with eighty-four attacks.<sup>34</sup>

Baloch insurgents strategized to attack non-Balochs to convey an intimidating message, primarily targeting Punjabis, including both residents and workers. These groups have indiscriminately targeted lower-wage workers, civilians, and white-collar professionals. In 2007, the president of the Punjabi Itihad Pakistan was assassinated by micreants in Quetta in what is considered one of the first such cases of violence against the Punjabi populace. Baloch militants were responsible for increased violence in 2009. The terrorist activities increased by 92 percent, with 614 incidents claimed by the militants. On August 14, 2010, militants hijacked a Quetta-Lahore bus, targeting ten Punjabi passengers. That same year, 250 non-Baloch, most of whom were Punjabis, were assassinated. A large population of Punjabi residents was forced to move prior to the violence. The year 2011 saw no progress, with 18 ethnic killings resulting in 28 deaths within the first five months. Terrorism in the province amplified by 39 percent in 2012, with 474 attacks, of which 121 were claimed by the BLA, and continued to escalate in 2013, with Baloch insurgents taking the lead with 424 terror attacks.<sup>35</sup>

In September 2012, ten workers and five Baloch tribesmen from a labour camp were shot dead in Khuzdar. On 11 April 2015, the Gobdan area of Turbat came under attack at midnight when militants targeted a dam construction site, killing 20 workers from Punjab and Sindh in their sleep. This attack was claimed by the BLA while the government tried compensating the grieving families. The attackers came prepared on motorbikes and pick-ups, while the investigation confirmed security negligence. The names of the deceased workers were Sobdad, Abdul Majeed, Mohammad Ayub, Mohammad Aslam, Mohammad Rana, Abdul Rehman, Mohammad Farooq, Haji Din Mohammad, Ashiq Hussain, Allah Dina, Mumtaz Ahmed, Bawal Khan, Mohammad Irshad, Faqir Mohammad, Afzal, Sajid Ali, Tahir Zaman, Kala, and Nela Methu. The name of one of the slain workers was not identified. The same month, another attack occurred in the Kharan district, killing four Sindhi labourers who were employed to work on road construction.<sup>36</sup> On May

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<sup>34</sup>Muzaffar, Khan, and Yaseen.

<sup>35</sup>Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resilience*. (Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>36</sup> “Workers Killed in Attack in Pakistan’s Balochistan,” *Al-Jazeera*, April 11, 2015, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/4/11/workers-killed-in-attack-in-pakistans-balochistan>.

13th, 2017, two gunmen on motorbikes shot dead ten Sindhi workers at a construction site in the Pishgan area of Gwadar, with eight killed on the spot. The assailants targeted two separate sites. The construction site was not specifically part of the CPEC, but rather a project for connecting roads. The Baloch Liberation Army claimed its responsibility.<sup>37</sup> On May 5, 2018, a similar attack was witnessed on a telecommunication project site, killing six Punjabi workers in district Kharan.<sup>38</sup>

On January 28, 2024, nine Punjabi workers were gunned down in their sleeping quarters in Saravan, Sistan-Balochistan. This targeted attack was seen as part of a pattern of previous assaults by the BLA against Punjabis, where they were attacked in sleep. Only three injured workers survived. These individuals hailed from Multan, Bahawalpur, and Muzaffargarh, with four identified as Muhammad Azhar, Ashfaq, Shoaib, and Usman. Among the deceased workers also were two brothers.<sup>39</sup>

On April 13, 2024, 11 Punjabi workers were kidnapped from a bus and later killed under a bridge in Noshki. Twelve gunmen had blocked the Quetta-Taftan Highway, as shown in a video later posted by the BLA on social media platforms. The assailants checked the workers' ID cards, who were travelling to Iran on work visas and belonged to Gujranwala, Mandi Bahauddin, and Wazirabad.<sup>40</sup>

On April 29, 2024, two Punjabi workers named Muhammad Shahid and Mohammed Naeem were assassinated in the Tump area of District Kech. The news was shared by a social media handle of the BLA. Two other Punjabi labourers were shot dead in a similar manner in the Dank area of Turbat a week earlier in this assault.<sup>41</sup>

On May 10, 2024, in a continuing series of attacks, seven workers were killed in their sleep. This incident occurred at midnight in Sarbandan town, Gwadar. The deceased were identified as

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<sup>37</sup>“10 Labourers Killed in Gwadar as Unidentified Assailants Open Fire at Construction Site,” *Dawn*, May 13, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1332896>.

<sup>38</sup> News Desk, “Six Punjabi Labourers Shot Dead in Quetta,” *Daily Times*, May 5, 2018, <https://dailytimes.com.pk/236131/six-punjabi-labourers-shot-dead-in-quetta/>.

<sup>39</sup>Saleem Shahid and Baqir Syes Sajjad, “9 Pakistani Labourers Shot Dead in Iran,” *Dawn*, January 28, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1809197>.

<sup>40</sup>Abdullah Zehri, “Gunmen Abduct and Kill 9 Passengers from Punjab after ID Check on Bus near Balochistan’s Noshki,” *Dawn*, April 13, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1827193>.

<sup>41</sup> Behram Baloch, “Two Labourers Gunned Down in Kech,” *Dawn*, April 29, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1830243>.

Muhammad Sajid, Adnan Ahmed, Ansar, Muqarab, Shan, Asadullah Quraishi, and Haseeb Ullah Quraishi. Some of the workers were underage as well. The slain workers hailed from Khanewal, Lodhran, and Mian Channu and had been employed at a local barber shop.<sup>42</sup>

On June 20, 2024, the BLA issued a press release, announcing the abduction of 10 men from a picnic spot in Shabaan, 45 km from Quetta. Four of the abductees were released, while seven were held hostage. The six abductees were brothers and cousins, identified as Muhammad Ali son of Khursheed – Khanewal, Muhammad Raza son of Sheikh Maqsood, and Muhammad Hmaza son of Muhammad Rafi – Multan, Hassan Raza, Farhan Raza, and Rehan Raza sons of Shan Raza, all three brothers and residents of Quetta.<sup>43</sup>

On July 6, 2024, the BLA issued another press statement quoting that the deadline for negotiations had passed and that they would execute the abductees. Later, on August 5, a local newspaper reported the recovery of six mutilated bodies in Harnai, allegedly belonging to the six Punjabi abductees.<sup>44</sup> However, no official source has confirmed this information.

On 25 August, 33 Punjabi passengers were offloaded from a bus travelling from Punjab to Balochistan in Musakhel around 10:00 PM. The passengers included women and children. The attackers identified the Punjabi citizens by checking their identity cards, who were identified as Wajid Hussain, son of Abid Hussain – Muzaffargarh, Muhammad Nadeem, son of Muhammad Tasleem – Khanewal, Rana Muhammad Zia-ul-Hassan Khan, son of Muhammad Afzal – Khanewal, Mehboob Hussain, son of Sher Muhammad – Layyah, Allah Bukhsh, son of Nizamuddin – Layyah, Muhammad Zameer, son of Ghulam Qasim – Layyah, Ghulam Murtaza, son of Ghulam Qasim – Layyah, Amir Saeed, son of Ahmed Saeed – Sahiwal, Muhammad Shahryar, son of Ameer Abdullah – Sargodha, Muhammad Wasim, son of Muhammad Hussain, – Multan, Muhammad Asif, son of Muhammad Arif – Multan, Khuda Bukhsh, son of Allah Bachaya – Multan, Shahbaz Khan, son of Faqeer Muhammad – Vehari, Qadeer Aslam, son of Muhammad

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<sup>42</sup>Behram Baloch and Saleem Shahid, “7 Workers Shot Dead in Targeted Attack near Gwadar,” *Dawn*, May 10, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1832607#:~:text=A%20heavy%20contingent%20of%20police,%2C%20Ansar%2C%20Shan%20and%20Muqara.>

<sup>43</sup> Shahid Saleem, “10 Picnickers Kidnapped from Quetta Outskirts,” *DAWN.COM*, June 21, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1840951>.

<sup>44</sup> Balochistan Current Affairs (@BalochistanCur1), “Six Bodies Were Discovered in District Harnai,” August 5, 2024, <https://x.com/BalochistanCur1/status/1820379559683907641>.

Aslam – Vehari, Asif Iqbal, son of Iqbal Masih – Lahore, Javaid Bukhsh, Nazir Ahmed son of Mahar Babia Khan – Shujaabad, Hamza Gujjar, son of Rafi Gujjar – Toba Tek Singh, Ghulam Jillani, son of Ghulam Rasool – Faisalabad, Ghazanfar Abbas Ali, Mazhar Ali, and Yasir Ali – Sirqpur. Four locals of Balochistan were too assassinated by the BLA: Abdul Ghafoor, a forces personnel, Sink, son of Haji Ghaza, from Loralai, Habib Khan, son of Jamak, from Dukki, and Muhammad Saqlain, a forces personnel. Some unofficial reports claimed the figure of the deceased to more than 40. The assailants also burnt 17 vehicles.

## **Dehumanization of Punjabi Workers**

Low-socioeconomic group individuals are often dehumanized by attributing certain markers of incivility to them. In post-colonial states, the economic condition often forces them out of formal education, leading to perceptions of illiteracy and lack of manners. Men from lower classes are considered dangerous for women regardless of their behaviour. The legacy of colonization has penetrated stereotypes, particularly citing Punjabi-speaking men and women with darker skin tones, low academic records, and accents as illiterate, dangerous, or incompetent. People with darker skin—women and men—receive less sympathy and compassion than those with fair skin tones. Punjabi language, with its various dialects, has carried the burden of stigma since 1849.<sup>45</sup> Punjabi speakers are less likely to be taken seriously as it is not considered the language of power and knowledge.<sup>46</sup>

When a person is killed, the killer or facilitators of the act consciously persuade themselves that the person is unworthy of dignity, compassion, and life. To dehumanize a victim is an essential step in justifying the killing and easing their conscience, by falsely accusing the targeted person of transgression.<sup>47</sup> Dehumanization based on economic status, race, or religion<sup>48</sup> is a prevalent issue in conflicts. Punjabi labourers, driven by the need for work, often move from their villages and

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<sup>45</sup>Sarfraz. Rabia, “Lost in the Translation: Punjabi Identity and Language in Pakistan,” *UCP Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences (HEC Recognized-Y Category)* 2, no. 2 (2024): 89–105.

<sup>46</sup>Sham Haidar et al., “I AM NOT PUNJABI, MY PARENTS ARE’: DEGRADATION OF THE LANGUAGE OF DOMINANT MAJORITY,” *Acta Linguistica Asiatica* 11, no. 2 (2021): 101–27, <https://doi.org/10.4312/ala.11.2.101-127>.

<sup>47</sup>Florence Stinglhamber and Stéphanie Demoulin, “Enlarging the Victim’s Perspective on Dehumanization,” n.d., <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4013-1625StéphanieDemoulinhttps://orcid.org/0000-0001-6903-8427>.

<sup>48</sup>Mario Sainz et al., “Dehumanization of Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Groups Decreases Support for Welfare Policies via Perceived Wastefulness,” *International Review of Social Psychology* 33, no. 1 (August 5, 2020): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.5334/IRSP.414>.

towns to other cities, provinces, or even cross borders under perilous circumstances. Moreover, the living standards of the low-socioeconomic groups irrespective of ethnic identity are equally poor – Punjabi or Baloch. Ethno-nationalists exploit these situations, by ensuring divides and creating polarization to save their relative interests, compounded by proxy influences.

In addition to being looked down upon as incapable, plunderers, or dangerous especially in hostile environments, these people are considered as less human, deserving of death. That's why; terrorists target them, without expecting a reaction. It is easy to animalize low-economic group workers among the local population to avoid any public backlash. An ethnic group is likely to suffer if it is associated with polarizing claims of oppression falsely promulgated even if it draws a numerical majority in the country. Dehumanization of Punjabi workers results in increased support for punitive actions, whether the group being targeted is vulnerable at a certain place.<sup>49</sup> This apology for violence as a just response creates further demeaning beliefs and uninformed attitudes among the local population for low-economic groups. A sense has been created as if Punjabi workers are taking white-collar jobs in Balochistan while this narrative is promoted by the privileged liberal-left and individuals leading the insurgency. Labourers engaged in several developmental projects often meet inadequate security measures and inattention. The working conditions and living arrangements are substandard. Images of the deceased workers in Gwadar and Saravan showed unsatisfactory living conditions, where numerous workers shared a single living quarter without proper bedding and air conditioning. Such examples disqualify the claims that justify BLA's aggression against poor labourers who supposedly are systemically privileged or enjoy better facilities compared to local workers in Balochistan.

Balochistan's terrain is arduous for work, exacerbated by substandard living and safety situations, let alone the threats directed against innocent workers. On June 3rd, 11 coal miners tragically suffocated to death in the Sanjdi area.<sup>50</sup> Hundreds of mine workers are killed due to working in challenging conditions intensified by the absence of safety precautions. From 2005 to

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<sup>49</sup>Engagedscholarship@csu Engagedscholarship@csu and Reginald Oh, "Dehumanization, Immigrants, and Equal Protection," 2019, [https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/fac\\_articlesEssays.1135](https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/fac_articlesEssays.1135).[https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/fac\\_articles/1135](https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/fac_articles/1135).

<sup>50</sup> Saleem Shahid, "Methane Gas Kills 11 inside Balochistan Coal Mine," June 4, 2024, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1837668>.

2021, a staggering 918 mine labourers lost their lives due to unsafe working conditions,<sup>51</sup> compounded by threats of terrorism.

### **Activism or Soft Power of Militants**

Eight participants representing liberal activists believed that violence against Punjabi workers is a just response, whereas three believed that BLA was not a terrorist organization and eleven responded that it was a complex issue. To respond to such arguments, one participant maintained how human rights activists, who believe in sanctity of life and nonviolence believe so? On the same question, one participant added that not all liberal activists justify BLA, instead the favour the non-violent face of separatism, to which another added, “who often fail to see through the blurred lines.” Many of these activists perceive Pakistan as a colonial state when their ideology itself is an extension of liberalism via colonialism.<sup>52</sup>

Terrorism is recrudescing in Pakistan, attacks on state establishments by ethno-nationalist religious and secular extremists have increased.<sup>53</sup> The liberal-left voices concern about the actions taken against militants; asserting these actions as state brutality upon ‘Indigenous’ people, by demanding the dissolution of counter-terrorism measures.<sup>54</sup> The binary that was secured over decisive issues such as terrorism, no longer exists due to polarization, the influence of global movements, or political instability. Lack of binary on pressing issues leads to un-sustainability as intellectual acceptance towards required values becomes relative.<sup>55</sup>

The debate on issues such as coercion of political workers, missing persons, and terrorist activities has been making rounds in Pakistan. From November 2023 to March 5, 2024, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), an independent human rights organization, issued press releases and updates about the human rights situation in the country. These updates highlighted issues such as delays in electoral results, intimidation of political workers associated with the PTI, BYC, and Pashtun Tahafuz Movement on various occasions, showed solidarity with BYC

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<sup>51</sup>Human Rights Commission of Pakistan *DEADLY LABOUR*, 2023, [www.hrcp-web.org](http://www.hrcp-web.org).

<sup>52</sup> Focus Group Discussion, Understanding Violence Against Punjabi Workers and Claims of Settlements.

<sup>53</sup>Focus Group Discussion.

<sup>54</sup>auratmatchisb., “Aurat March Islamabad Demand No. 3.,” Instagram, March 16, 2023.

<sup>55</sup>G Ray Funkhouser, “Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society,” *Sage Publications Sage CA: Thousand Oaks, CA*, 1989, 19–32.

marchers and demands, expressed concerns over the deteriorating law and order situation due to militant attacks in Bajour Agency, Bannu, Kurram Agency, and coercion of political workers in Taunsa Shareef and Karachi. However, during this period, no press release was issued addressing the killings of Punjabi workers by the BLA on Iranian soil on January 27<sup>th</sup> or in Noshki on 11 April 2024.<sup>56</sup> Discourse analysis reveals individuals' inclinations and how they define a certain problem. A few activists condemned the Noshki Bus incident only after receiving criticism, and even then, they did not explicitly name the culprits. Rather, they contingently portrayed the Punjabi workers as representatives of the state, discreetly justifying the BLA's actions by inferring that if the BLA were targeting the Punjabis, there must be a rationale behind it, while Punjabi workers were blatantly referred to as "settlers" and "migrants".

Sovereignty and human rights regime are two separate questions towards correlated objectives – security and welfare. If one weighs more than the other, the other will be weaker.<sup>57</sup> Simultaneously, the Baloch Missing Persons campaign led by the Baloch Yakjehtee Committee has provided contentious discourse on sovereignty and human rights involving individuals associated with the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), who are referred as legitimate combatants.<sup>58</sup> Twenty eight (28) Baloch citizens were killed in the two terrorist attacks claimed by the BLA, a day before the general elections.<sup>59</sup> According to a surrendered BLA commander Sarfraz Bangalzai, BLA assassinated around five to six thousand Baloch men who mobilized against them.<sup>60</sup> The state classifies such combatants as proxies and terrorists who continue to challenge its writ.<sup>61</sup> The Chinese Foreign Ministry, following the surrender of a BLA commander Sarfraz Bangalzai, criticized the dual standards of international regimes in combating terrorism. The spokesperson, Mao Ning, stressed the importance of regional security and accused regional and international

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<sup>56</sup>@HRCP87, "Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. '@HRCP87.' X (Formerly Twitter). Accessed March 5, 2024. <https://twitter.com/HRCP87>," accessed March 5, 2024, <https://twitter.com/HRCP87>.

<sup>57</sup>Christian Reus-Smit, "Human Rights and the Social Construction of Sovereignty," *Review of International Studies* 27, no. 4 (2001): 519–38, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0260210501005198>.

<sup>58</sup>Baloch Yakjehti Committee. 'Press Conference on Pakistan Airstrikes in Iran.' Press Release, Islamabad, January 18, 2024.

<sup>59</sup>Sahar Baloch, "Baloch, Sahar. 'Pakistan election: Two blasts kill 28 in Balochistan day before vote.' BBC News, February 7, 2024. Accessed March 7, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68226516>," *BBC News*, sec. February 7, 2024, accessed March 7, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68226516>.

<sup>60</sup>Dukhtar e Balochistan, "Sarfraz Bangalzai Address to a Conference," X (formerly Twitter), March 27, 2024, [https://twitter.com/Dukhtar\\_E\\_B/status/1774062501228916849?t=y\\_wWBF7gaa\\_GbFBFiP2FJA&s=19](https://twitter.com/Dukhtar_E_B/status/1774062501228916849?t=y_wWBF7gaa_GbFBFiP2FJA&s=19)].

<sup>61</sup> GOVERNMENT OF PAKISTAN, "NATIONAL COUNTER TERRORISM AUTHORITY ISLAMABAD," n.d., <https://nfs.punjab.gov.pk/Organization>.

regimes of using militants for its interests targeting workers and destroying developmental infrastructure. Balochistan holds vital geo-strategic significance in the region, where both China and Pakistan seek to benefit from the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor worth \$64 billion, Gwadar being the centre.<sup>62</sup>

Liberal activists believe that military solutions against insurgents who bear arms against the state are unjustified. To answer this, a justification was given that “it is unethical of any state to militarily mobilize against the native population just the way it is unethical of Israel to mobilize against Hamas.” It is inferred that they draw their moral positioning from both the Native Rights Movement in North America and recent developments following October 7. However, it is significant to ask on what grounds the Pakistani state, armed forces or Punjabis living in Balochistan were settlers like the USA or Israel? Responding to the question of Indigenous debate, Zahid Hussain, an expert on Indigenous rights, asserts the discussions on perceived indigeneity as witnessed in the West, would only harm stakes of anti-state actors who instrumentalize indigeneity claims, are neither natives nor Indigenous compared to the people of Punjab and Sindh, who draw both archaeological and genetic evidence from Indus Valley.<sup>63</sup> He emphasizes the history in which native Sewai<sup>64</sup> or Jaat were expelled from modern-day Balochistan by invading tribes of Rind and Lashari, colonizing Kharan and Lasbela, and a mass settlement of Balochs in the South of Punjab to take refuge, who were welcomed by the native Punjabis.<sup>65</sup> If such assertions are rooted in geography or history, they are required to be evaluated through three rule-of-thumb criteria to either confirm or refute i.e., DNA, archaeology, and scripture.<sup>66</sup> Subsequently, if such claims are confirmed through historical evidence, it not only resolves issues of integration but also has the potential to counter false claims at an intellectual level. To draw a comparison between disparate entities – hard powers or colonizers like the USA or Israel and the colonized, hints at development

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<sup>62</sup> Riyaz ul Khaliq, “China Calls Out ‘Double Standards’ Against Terrorism,” *Asia-Pacific*, 12 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/china-calls-out-double-standards-against-terrorism/3093977#>.

<sup>63</sup> Focus Group Discussion, Understanding Violence Against Punjabi Workers and Claims of Settlements.

<sup>64</sup> AB Awan, *Baluchistan, Historical and Political Processes* (New Century, 1985).

<sup>65</sup> Durdana Qasim and Zahid Hussain, “The Implications of Rind and Lashar’s Wars on Baloch and Balochistan,” *Pakistan Study Centre* 10, no. 2 (2019): 307–21, <http://pscjournal.uob.edu.pk/journal/index.php/psc/article/view/371>.

<sup>66</sup> Focus Group Discussion, Understanding Violence Against Punjabi Workers and Claims of Settlements.



syndrome, which gives the idea that liberal-left conforms to the popular global narratives without taking into account the history of the region in tangible realities.

When local activism lacks an intelligible vision to bring change in their communities, it merely resorts to performance instead of policing transformative actions. It often aims its sympathies towards more convenient forms of advocacy that align with its ideals somewhere else. Critical theorists opine that mainstream activism produces vigorous ideas, which marginalize issues that do not fit into their established beliefs. The killing of Punjabi workers does not qualify such protocols, where they are viewed as plunderers of resources as exemplified by the anti-state nationalists. Additionally, postcolonial theory could suggest examining ethnic and regional identities intersecting with power dynamics and activism, representing how various groups may be prioritized given dominant discourses.

## **Conclusion**

The allocation of resources among provinces should focus on addressing economic disparities or maximizing provincial royalties, to adequately respond to grievances of each province. Moreover, critics claim the security situation and the role of militant groups targeting well-head production unit or development projects is a marker of the dishonesty of nationalists consciously hindering the economic growth of Balochistan and complaining about lack of development.

When activism is categorized into preferences and denial, it becomes more about statement than a concise commitment to welfare. It's essential to condemn violence against one group to stand with another. Violence against the poor, whether in the name of power or resistance, undermines the moral integrity of any ideology or movement. It alienates common people from understanding the real issues and justifies authorities to maintain unrestricted control by any means necessary. Targeting low-income groups, such as Punjabi workers, is not only unjust but is driven by bigotry. By directing violence in the name of resistance, human rights activists lose moral grounds to lead any cause they support. The dehumanization of Punjabi workers relays how dismissive people's suffering can be when certain interests are at stake. The responsibility of the killings of workers falls not only on the insurgents but also on the authorities, which failed to ensure security and safety.

Addressing violence against workers requires decisive state action, a thorough strategic and intellectual understanding to resolve the Balochistan problem. To tackle an insurgency, tangible efforts are made on grounds but the claims made by such militant groups must be studied on intellectual grounds; rather than negating them on bias. Given the critique of Zionism, the liberal-left is often seen comparing the Punjabi populace, the Punjabis of the South Punjab or workers in Balochistan to Zionist settlers, despite the genetic and archeological markers. Additionally, the South of Punjab locals have been native while the Balochs migrated to Punjab since the Rind-Lashari wars and continued in later years. The efforts to draw a false equivalence between the (formerly colonized) now Pakistan – Punjabis and colonial settler states of the US or Israel represent a lack of epistemological and anthropological understanding regarding the circumstances leading to the formation of Pakistan, the ancient to modern history of the Indus Valley, and standards of political and economic development in a neo-colonized world. Could it be said here that the said regime deliberately denies historical facts to prove subjective claims?

The sudden change in stance on Hamas and equating terrorist organizations, which commits violence against civilians, contributes to logical fallacy and mount state-critical rhetoric to escalate the situation rather than resolve it. The traditional rationale to support Palestine (or Hamas) draws its roots in Pakistan's foreign policy on Palestine, resonating with the spiritual and ideological solidarity shared between the two, that too directed against Israel on religious and geopolitical imperatives, which the liberal-left has always lacked. Does it suggest its support for Hamas is following a trend? The superficial support extended into endorsing the BLA – a terrorist outfit by sketching an equilibrium between the two; questions intellectual reasoning, compromises civilian safety, and national security. It is incumbent upon the concerned individuals to delineate where to draw the line to achieve a trending moral compass. Furthermore, it is crucial to resolve the plight of Baloch people not only to prevent future resurgence but for the welfare of Balochistan. The human rights regime and the state can only work together effectively when these groups do not promote violence against civilians and security personnel. Additionally, what outcomes would emerge, were the state to yield to the demands of militant groups? Is the moral compass of the human rights regime of that momentum to compromise the sovereignty of Pakistan?