

Role of Social Media in Securitization of Baloch Conflict

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Abstract

Social media has revolutionized politics and transformed the conflict into new trends. This transformation does not necessarily mean that the conflict loses or gains its effectiveness rather an individualistic aspect comes into play. Baloch conflict is a pivotal issue facing Pakistan since its inception that has played a crucial role in determining its geopolitical strategy. Baloch conflict has been ignited and extinguished many times since independence of Pakistan, they have tried different tactics such as insurgency in the past, going for guerilla warfare. Recently 5th generation warfare has been employed and social media has been utilized as a platform for propagation of message. This is due to the fact that Baloch conflict is absent from mainstream media and social media, because of its freedom of speech, is filling its shoes. Even though social media has offered a space for genuine grievances, it has also provided the opportunity to insurgents and anti-state actors to spread misinformation. Its dual role of access and manipulation makes it a stage of polarization that needs to be addressed instead of being ignored. This study explores the securitization of social media as a platform and how much social media has transformed narrative and information trends about Baloch conflict and how people respond to them.

Keywords: Social Media; Baloch Conflict; Anti-state; Narrative Building, Securitization, Fake News.

1. Introduction

Contradicting alternative facts from the media, government officials and activists complicate reality for the public. Propaganda warfare has always affected and altered conflicts. In today's digital era, targeted selling of "alternative facts" has a growing impact on inter and intra-state connections. Baloch conflict has really taken a severe turn since the arrival of social media platforms. Anyone can manipulate and create artificial facts out of thin air and publish it on Facebook and Twitter without any credibility. This kind of pseudo journalism misinforms the general public about the real situation in the province and uncertainty increases in general public.

Baloch discontent is caused by persistence of tribal structure and the impoverishment of the populace. Local Baloch demands primarily concern their people's linguistic, religious, political and ethnic identity. Looking at the

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current scenario in Balochistan, the present situation is primarily due to uneven distribution, power concentration and an undemocratic political system. Baloch conflict has several dimensions, including inter-tribal, intra-tribal and inter-provincial which is being used by both domestic and foreign actors (Niaz, Hassan, & Irtaza, 2020).

Balochistan has seen insurgencies and military operations against militants and anti-state forces on a consistent basis. Disturbances in the province, such as resistance to the 'One Unit Movement' in 1955, the 'Dissident Movement' in the 1960s and the '1973 Insurgency,' are some of the examples that have not only harmed the socioeconomic uplift of its people but have also created a bad social view and perspective of the society (Jilani & Mujaddid, 2020).

Over the years, the geostrategic importance of Balochistan has changed the attitude of authorities. Since the inception of China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) Project in excess of 46 Billion dollars and its flagship project of Gwadar port, Federal government has focused upon economic development of the province. But Baloch nationalists have repeatedly opposed and labeled it as a form of colonial exploitation since they believe that this corridor will only exploit the province resources on the expense of ethnic Baloch. Even though Pakistan has tried to address Baloch grievances by giving greater autonomy through 18th amendment, introducing Aghaz-e-Haqqoq-e-Balochistan (A-HQ-BLN) Package and provision of a higher percentage in NFC award, but still misperceptions prevail and belief of Baloch populace on state institutions tapers off (Ahmed & Jabeen, 2018).

Social activists claim that people and voices in Balochistan are constantly silenced through oppression and systematic cleansing. They believe that extra judicial disappearances and killings are regularly carried out by unknown authorities. Mutilated corpses that are discovered around Balochistan strengthens the claimed notions (Bhattacharjee, 2015). The issue of missing persons remains unresolved that adds to the ambiguity which has further stirred controversy and has aggravated the insurgency in the province. The insurgency has spread to the middle class and young people who connect on social media sites as people find it easier to highlight their grievances on the internet, instead of relying on 'controlled' media.

Furthermore, the prevailing situation shows that dependence on military means with faulty and short-sighted actions of winning minds and hearts of the people have failed as a strategy to maintain temporary peace, let alone a durable and sustainable peace. To accomplish the intended objectives, a strategy is needed to seek the fundamental causes of the issue and deal in a systematic manner.

As a result, it is deemed necessary to handle the persistent and recurrent issues of anti-state groups as well as Balochistan's concerns in new, inventive and most appropriate methods and means. Conflict transformation from conventional warfare to information warfare provides an opportunity to

both state and non-state actors to clear the fog of uncertainty and resolve matters through irenic and factual basis.

2. Research Methodology

The theoretical approach for conducting research for this paper has been mixed-method. Mixed-method approach has multiple benefits as it includes enjoining of both quantitative and qualitative data in such a manner that research problems are comprehensively addressed. It also provides methodological flexibility, logical basis and deep understanding of micro case studies. Therefore, mixed-method delivers the best way to address research topics by combining the strengths and adjusting for the flaws of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. For qualitative paradigm, secondary resources such as research articles, books, newspapers and review of laws and legislation are employed to explain the dynamics of conflict while for quantitative analysis an extensive survey was conducted to analyze the nature of implications of conflict. The survey was conducted from approximately two hundred individuals from across six universities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi Division that particularly included graduate and undergraduate students.

3. Theorizing the Puzzle

This conflict has largely been analyzed through different available lens such as Securitization theory, Human Needs Theory and Conflict Transformation theory. Conflict transformation by John Paul Lederach refers to changes in characteristics of a conflict. With the dawn of fifth generation warfare conflict has transformed into hybrid warfare. This has also transformed Baloch Conflict from physical militia resistance to online narrative formation in which a common man has the ability to observe as well as participate in narrative propagation through social media platform.

Social media has created mass awareness about Baloch Conflict and has become mainstream because of independent reporters and journalists. This mainstreaming has in fact securitized the conflict throughout national level with international reach. Even though state is very resourceful entity, it is facing resistance from Baloch nationalist when it comes to portraying the condition of Baloch nation. The media-perception interaction is critical to securitization processes. The media can and does impact public perception of a given phenomenon as a challenge or an existential danger to public security, economic success, social stability or cultural homogeneity by using precise terminology and storylines. Political actors use media narratives to promote and instrumentalize securitized concerns in order to position themselves as the only actors capable of providing a solution.

John Burton has argued that if an actor cannot fulfil her or his Basic Human Needs within the existing, "status-quo" system, they may create parallel, "revolutionary" systems for doing so. The theory is useful to identify the needs of Baloch people behind their positions or desired objectives. There are three fundamental issues; first, distribution of resources; second, identity

and third, recognition of equal rights for Balochs, that are akin to all issues that the Baloch nationalists have been demanding for years.

4. A Historical Context

Balochistan consists of an area of 347,190 Sq, Kms comprising 43.6% of total land of Pakistan. It is situated in South-West region of Pakistan, bordering Iran and Afghanistan. Balochistan, previously known as State of Kalat, was an independent proxy state under British Raj. The controversial history of Balochistan starts from partition of 1947, when Khan of Kalat during negotiations with government of Pakistan wanted state of Kalat to remain independent. But after nine months deadlock, Khan was forced to accede on 27th March 1948. This started the first insurgency for a period of six months that resulted in the surrender of insurgents. The second one was in response to Ayub's famous 'One Unit Policy' during the late 1950's, as it diffused Baloch identity. The third insurgency took place from 1963-1969 again with the aim of achieving Balochistan's provincial status. This insurgency was alleviated after 'One Unit Policy' was abolished and Balochistan was declared a province in 1970. The fourth insurgency took place between the mid-1970s, when coalition between Baloch government and Bhutto was ended and militarization in the province was proliferated and it only ended when army was removed and Baloch nationalists were released. The fifth and ongoing insurgency started in 2004 after the assassination of Akbar Bugti. The current insurgency rose due to multiple reasons including exploitation, injustice and marginalization of Balochs (Tanner, 2019).

5. Social Media Transforming Baloch Conflict

Social media has grown into a massive forum for individuals from all walks of life in both oppressed and autonomous countries. In most nations, social media has become a useful instrument for replacing 'biased' and 'censored' media. It has been documenting trends and hashtags on Twitter addressing every day and unusual issues from throughout the globe. Young people, on the other hand, from any society, developed or developing, free or oppressed, rich or poor, are frequently seen using social media sites for various protests such as educational questions, social disruptions, rule of law, economic infliction of injustices, governmental performances and so on (Shirky, 2011).

In an era where social media has become an essential component of life as well as identity, trying to prevent individuals from accessing and sharing information on such platforms is likely to result in the frustration, aggression and violent resistance that is typical of people who are oppressed and rejected fundamental human rights. Facebook and Twitter have evolved into powerful instruments for social change and activism in Balochistan. The Twitter network has played an essential role in public debate in the country, particularly the Baloch nationalist group's propaganda campaigns (Nadeem, Mustafa, & Kakar, 2021).

Protesters and activists use hashtags like #BalochLivesMatter, #BalochistanIsNotPakistan, #ShariTheLegend etc. for getting the attention of larger audience on social media. Through social media platforms the general public was made aware of the sit-in in protest by the students at University of Balochistan at the abduction of two of their classmates. On November 1, 2021, the two missing students, Sohail Baloch & Fassieh Baloch, were kidnapped from the university hostel. Even though the issue was covered in several print publications, it was overlooked. The protest came into limelight only after being highlighted on social media which provided national publicity (Badshah, Ashraf, Faiz, & Kamran, 2021). Following pressure from the public, the provincial administration was forced to form a committee to address the students' concerns.

5.1 Positive Role of Social Media for Solving Baloch Conflict

Among the general diaspora it is believed by more than half of the population that social media can play a positive role in resolving the unending Baloch conflict as social media provides uncensored access to the ground realities instantaneously which are not available in mainstream media. About 31% of people did not hold an opinion regarding social media as they were not familiar with its functionality and scope of influence. Skepticism was shown by 11% of the people who believed that this could backfire and create an exaggerated situation regarding the conflict.

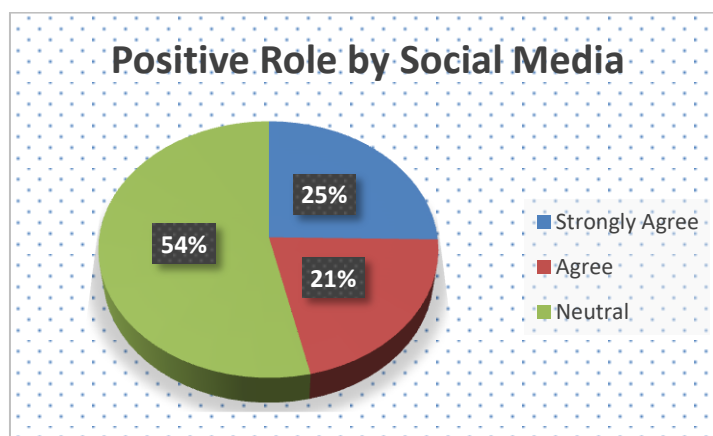


Figure 1: Positive Role of Social Media for Solving Baloch Conflict

6. Narrative Building through Social Media

Narrative building has a long history and has been a part of human society from around 200,000 years ago. Narrative building has utilized almost every mode of communication that has existed throughout its history and played a significant role in societal evolution. In this age of information, modern technological advancements have taken narrative building to an unprecedented level. Social media has played an important role in forming perceptions,

influencing results, amplifying ideas, establishing meaning and sparking disputes. First time in history, a platform is available to the masses which is free from censorship and state control. Social media has specially facilitated issues that are not easily debated on mass media and gave voice to the oppressed (Tagliapietra, 2021). In case of Pakistan, social media has provided Baloch conflict limelight of such a nature that has never been experienced before. Balochistan has been experiencing continuous conflict between Baloch nationalist and the central government. Both have conflicting opinions about the causes of this conflict which are often debated on social media, mostly on Twitter and Facebook. Several Baloch activists have started to raise their voices through social media in order to expose the offenses being done by the state. These separatist through narrative building on social media are trying to further their Baloch movement and they have been successful in drawing attention of general masses. The state has also tried to emphasize that economic lagging is the primary cause behind the security crisis in the province.

6.1. State vs Anti-State Narrative

One of the most surprising facts explored through this research was that majority of the participants believed that the state narrative of the Baloch conflict is more accurate while less than a quarter presumed separatists as the correct one. Even though we live in a digital free world, the state can manipulate its way through social media narrative building for influencing their policy structure.

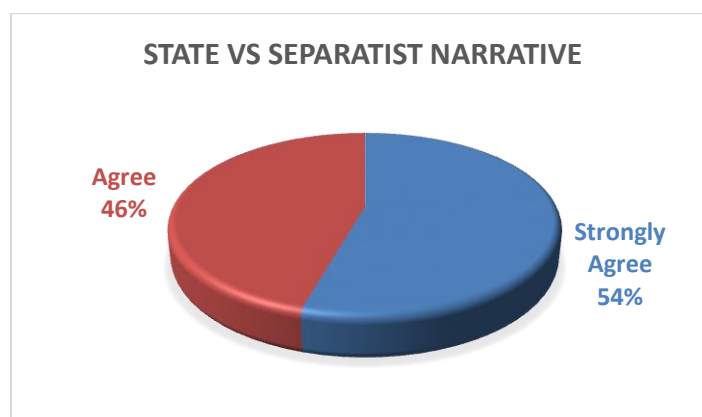


Figure 2: State vs Anti-State Narrative

Each narrative seeks to build its own version of reality. Recent assaults in Balochistan have prompted Baloch nationalists to spread misinformation, propaganda and false news using social media platforms, particularly Twitter. A recent example is the BLA strike on Frontier Corps (FC) outposts in Panjgur & Noshki districts which sparked misinformative campaigns all over Twitter. According to ISPR, 20 terrorists were killed, and 9 FC members were martyred. While BLA's Spokesperson Jeeyad Baloch released a press

statement which stated that the combat in Noshki lasted 20 hours and killed 100 enemy soldiers, while the one in Panjgur lasted 48 hours and killed 75 enemy personnel. ISPR and Pakistan's Ministry of Interior refuted these reports by stating them as propaganda. Regardless of how they presented the facts, Twitter was riddled with false information (Saleem, 2022).

Certain accounts on twitter were particularly active in spreading unverified material and mobilizing certain twitter trends for ostensibly political or other motives. During and after the assaults, popular hashtags such as #BalochistanSolidarityDay, #BalochistanIsNotPakistan and #FreeBalochistan entered the mainstream Twitter landscape. While the majority of these negative patterns were organised by seemingly independent research studies or evident Indian activists, their influence on shaping a certain discourse was significant.

Trends on Twitter are a crucial reflection of a nation's leaning towards a specific narrative in recent years. The Indian fixation with spreading misinformation, abusing Pakistan's security problems and exploiting existing or new fracture lines is a major cause of worry. Pakistan holds India directly accountable for its deteriorating security situation, despite New Delhi's numerous denials of Indian participation or assistance of terrorist organizations in Pakistan (Mirza & Babar, 2020). However, misinformation spread by Indian-based social media accounts, along with other indisputable facts, is making it more difficult to concur with the Indian line of reasoning.

7. State Regulating Social Media

Since the creation of Pakistan, Balochistan has been referred to as an information black hole. It received this reputation due to the absence of free media. The censorship has resulted in national security threats, financial crisis and lack of interest in media in provincial population. The lack of free and impartial media exposure in Balochistan has aggravated the province's situation (Iqbal, 2017). Balochistan Express, the media house sponsored by government ads, fails to reflect the deplorable situation of the province.

State narrative is that any information that reflects state's negligence in any capacity is regarded as anti-state. Balochistan is considered as a particularly delicate issue in most Pakistani newsrooms since the majority of Balochistan's problems are found in the armed struggle and why it is ruled. That is why there is little opportunity for independent reporting since it invariably leads to discussions about the core reasons of the insurgency, nationalist grievances and the establishment's dubious activities in the province. As a result, when independent coverage of Balochistan is not permitted, there is a lack of awareness of the subject. The media is therefore limited to the mainstream narrative, which often conceals the truth & misinforms the audience (Sarwar, Zaidi, Shahzad, & Shafiq, 2022). Each of these causes, alone or in combination, leads to the systemic marginalization of Balochistan's existence, struggles and ambitions.

For the purpose of national security, the state creates legislation and regulations for media activities to keep it in check. Elites use these legislations to control freedom, imprison political opponents and charge suspected terrorists without trial in the name of securitization. It is important to note that securitization is not effective unless the securitizing actors' statements that a primary unit is under existential danger are accepted and acted upon by the appropriate audience (public sentiment, politicians, military personnel and other elites).

Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act, 2016 (PECA) was passed to regulate media whether it be electronic or social, so that distribution of information is legitimised. Unfortunately, regulation has a very gray area which is often difficult to dissect from what is true or false, right or wrong. Two specific cyber laws from PECA Act have created controversy pertaining to social media are Clauses 9 and 10 of Chapter 2 respectively.

Clause 9. Glorification of an offence: (1) Whoever prepares or disseminates information, through any information system or device, with the intent to glorify an offence relating to terrorism, or any person convicted of a crime relating to terrorism, or activities of proscribed organizations or individuals or groups shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to seven years or with fine which may extend to ten million rupees or with both.

Clause 10. Cyber terrorism: Whoever commits or threatens to commit any of the offences under sections 6, 7, 8 or 9, where the commission or threat is with the intent to-

- a) coerce, intimidate, create a sense of fear, panic or insecurity in the Government or the public or a section of the public or community or sect or create a sense of fear or insecurity in society;
- b) advance inter-faith, sectarian or ethnic hatred;
- c) advance the objectives of organizations or individuals or groups proscribed under the law, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to fourteen years or with fine which may extend to fifty million rupees or with both.

Above mentioned laws have become an issue towards freedom of expression.

Section 10 describes cyber-terrorism, which is an essential element for the objectives of this Act. However, it has been argued that this term has been generalized. According to critics, cyber-terrorism crimes must be clearly related to "violence and the possibility of damage and injury." However, section 10 (b) defines "inter-faith, sectarian, or ethnic hatred" as a qualifying for cyber-terrorism. As a result, the provision's phrasing often confuses terrorism with instigation of violence or hate.

In general, confusing and technical legal provisions are frequently examined using the vagueness theory. This idea requires criminal laws to

clearly specify what constitutes punishable behaviour and any legislation that violates this doctrine is considered to be invalid for vagueness.

Several additional elements of the Act threaten free expression. Section 9 examines the glorifying of an offence and describes the sorts of offences and acts that are criminalized. However, this part has been written in unduly broad terms, which violates international rules of free expression.

Section 9 of the PECA would very likely restrict any discussion on national security, terrorism or even topics of general public interest. The fact that this clause refers to "terrorism-related crimes" and "activities of prohibited groups" does not mitigate the harm it presents to free expression and the press (Khan, 2018).

During the Shaari Baloch fiasco, people who even mentioned reservations on the current plight of Baloch nation were threatened with severe consequences under the PECA Act. These laws have been opposed by international humanitarian organizations as they not only undermine freedom of speech but also a tool of oppression in the digital world.

7.1. Censorship of Baloch Crisis

When surveyed amongst general diaspora about what they feel about censorship of Baloch crisis after the advent of social media, nearly 45% people voted it as neutral, depicting that extent of censorship in free media depends upon an individual's usage (Figure 3).

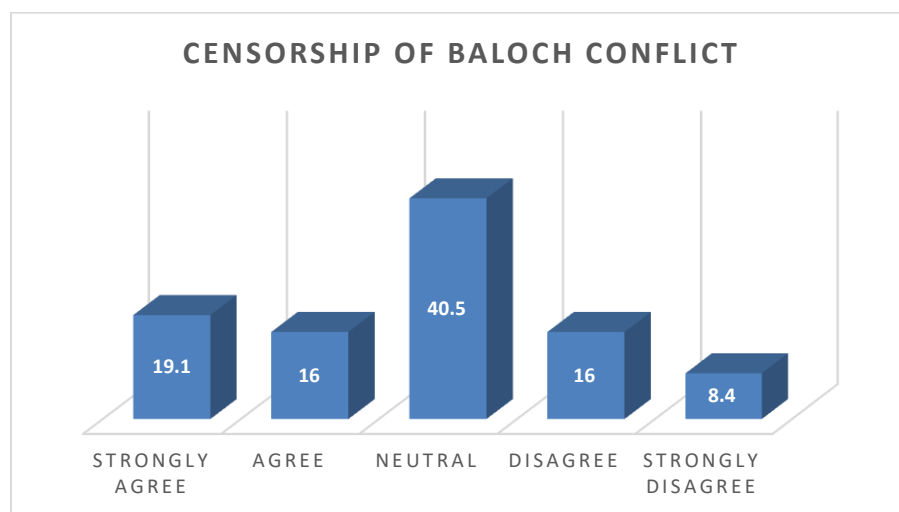


Figure 3: Censorship of Baloch Conflict

The Gwadar sit-in, organized for 32 days by Maulana Hidayat ur Rehman, was one of the most visible illustrations of how the provincial and federal administrations had consistently ignored the concerns of Gwadar, the hub city of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The demonstrations were likewise ignored by the official media. Gwadar's march,

like the rest of the rallies in Balochistan, would've have gone undetected if not for social media and the fact that Pakistan's largest project, CPEC, is geographically situated in Balochistan.

8. Censorship vs Freedom of Speech

It is generally perceived that the information in mainstream media is heavily censored, and it fails to cover the ground reality in Balochistan, so that the masses are unable to grasp the gravity of the situation. Censorship by Pakistani media of the Baloch liberation fight has prompted Baloch activists to embrace social media as a vital tool to further their cause on a broader scale (Tahir & Niaz, 2016). News checkpoints, filtering or altering facts and the lack of a structured media infrastructure have long existed in Balochistan, resulting in just half of what occurs at the grassroots level making it to mainstream news. The true extent of the continued injustice is unknown to the general public. Social media is a vital information source for the general public, who are becoming more intrigued by Baloch aspiration for independence. The use of social media platforms has greatly aided in the propagation of the Baloch independence movement.

Twitter has become a genuine platform for Baloch to share their views on the government's policies and conduct. It has also been a source of information for the general public, whether verifiable or not. Over time, it has evolved into a method of protest movements by civil society as well as a weapon of peaceful protest by the young population opposing unfavorable government policies (Lanz & Eleiba, 2018).

8.1. Effective role of social media in highlighting the conflict

When asked about impact of social media in publicizing Baloch conflict, about more than 65% of the people had opinion that social media has played a significant role in propagating and highlighting it (Figure 4).

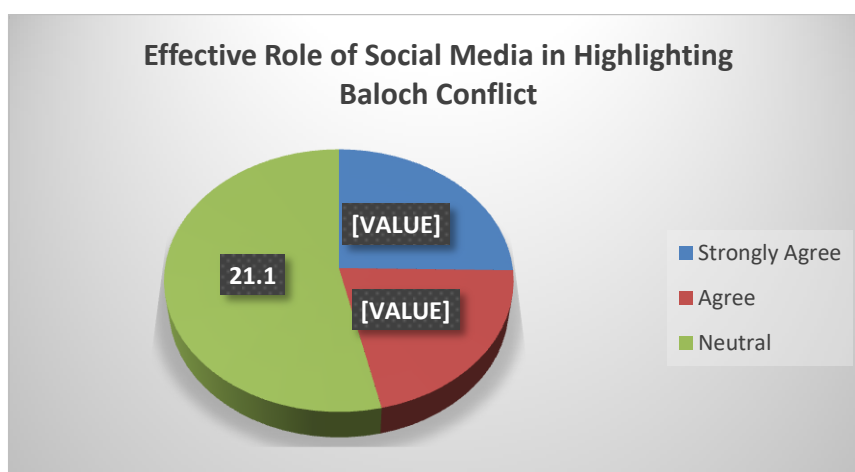


Figure 4: Effective role of social media in highlighting the conflict

8.2 Individual activism on the conflict

Even though people had an optimistic view when it comes to role of social media on propagating Baloch conflict but there was a contradiction in their individual action. When asked about if they have ever raised their voice on social media for Baloch conflict, surprisingly 2/3 of the people never addressed this issue on social media platform. Likewise, people who raised their voices did so only under particular circumstances. This shows that people are reluctant to address controversial issues in public even though social media has no restrictions.



Figure 5: Individual Activism on the Conflict

9. Misuse of Free Media by Activists

As the flow of information on social media is in control of the public, this introduces new complications as well. The traditional idea of war is gradually being supplanted by attempts to win hearts and minds in digital realm. Propaganda has long been a favoured tactic of nations for establishing the groundwork for the continuous progress of their goal (Nadeem et al., 2021). The digital domain has given propaganda science a completely new technique and power of impact.

The influence of misinformation in the digital arena is so powerful that confusion has now become the norm. Truth and facts are so much intertwined with propaganda in age of social media that it is really difficult to disenfranchise each other (Zeitsoff, 2017).

There is no way to prevent this vile given the nature of modern media. The smear campaign of suicide bomber Shari Baloch portrayed an ugly side of social media activism in which a terrorist was depicted and praised as a martyr. There were several posts by anonymous accounts glorifying struggle

of Shari for the Baloch nation and how it will revive Baloch nationalism for many years to come.

Because of the perceived strength of social networks as a political instrument in the hands of citizens, governments in several jurisdictions have instituted steps to monitor and control activity on these platforms. States are progressively striving for a larger role in Internet governance as the political stakes connected with it are high.

10. Future of the conflict

People were asked about their thoughts as to how this conflict will unfold in the future, to which they had varying responses. Almost half of the people (46%) were disappointed with the efforts being made on both sides and believed that this stalemate would continue and the situation unmoved. 1/5th (20%) of the total people interviewed were optimistic that the crisis will end with complete integration of Balochistan and end of insurgency. Surprisingly 17% were of the opinion that separation of Balochistan will be the final outcome of this prolonged conflict. Most of the people giving this opinion were ethnic Baloch, implying that they were not satisfied with the state's treatment. According to survey, 10% reckon that the outcome of the Baloch conflict will depend on the course of actions that the state takes in the future. 7% of them opiniated of increased insurgency as the future outcome.

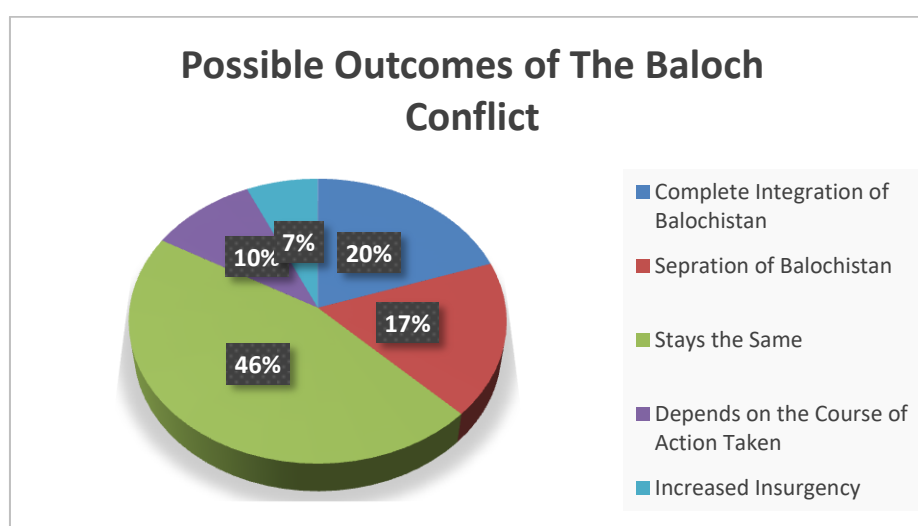


Figure 6: Possible outcome of Baloch Conflict

11. Conclusion

It has been observed that with the advent of Social Media, narrative building is not so simple as it was before with multiple non-state actors and activists in their individual capacities have become as significant as state. State in the past has tried to suppress the plight of Baloch through print and mass media but social media has changed the norms of the battleground. Baloch activists have

highlighted the issues faced by the province. This publicizing of Baloch crises has created awareness amongst masses. Even though social media has provided freedom in its usage, it has also become a victim of indoctrination by multiple actors who manipulate it for their self-interest.

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