

**Digital Nationalism: The Rise of Baloch Separatist Narratives on Social Media (2020–2025)**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This study examines the phenomenon of digital nationalism in the Baloch separatist struggle. The study looks at the use of social media contacts to build a separatist narratives, in the years, 2020 to 2025. We draw upon both digital nationalism and framing theories temporally to understand the actual characteristics of Baloch digital activism, and the Baloch dorganisation, as found on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and Telegram. We use qualitative content analysis and digital ethnography, where we focus on how the frames of 'victimhood', 'state repression', 'cultural legitimacy', and 'transnational solidarity' range from the Tik Tok and hashtagged, daily persistence of Baloch digital activism to the ongoing, long lived collective memories of state repression across the Baloch diaspora. The findings suggest that Baloch sepraitsts engaged binge each of the identified frames, but the role of diaspora activists stood out in the collaborative work to develop online spaces for the Baloch nationalism, alternatively: for the visual dissent related to the locally produced media, and nationalist agendas, as the evidence indicates that the use of digital media uniquely construct and amplify diaspora brings. While these digital spaces offer visibility and coherence for the Baloch nationalist cause, they also invite state disavowal, state repulsion, censorship of accounts of and processes of distance from state interactions and distance from the Baloch cause via the polarisation of the collective digital space. In terms of conclusions; these frames provides actions solutions for inclusive dialogue, that move toward disruption of diverse digital rights, and most of importantly locally rooted counter-narratives. Overall, this study contributes to the wider understanding of the characteristics of online insurgency and identity politics, and the role of state–society relations in opened potentially digitally mediated conflicts.*

**Keywords:** Baloch Nationalism, Digital Nationalism, Baloch Separatist Narratives, Social Media Activism, Diaspora Politics

**INTRODUCTION**

In this digital era, the fight for national identity, resistance, and political mobilization has moved online, and nowhere is this more apparent than in Balochistan, where decades of political unclearness, human rights violations, and economic deprivation have enabled a long-lasting separatist insurrection. Since 2020, Baloch separatist movements have increasingly migrated their narratives to social media platforms, particularly Twitter (now X), YouTube, Telegram, and Facebook. These platforms have enabled activists, insurgent sympathizers, and diasporic Baloch communities to circumvent traditional media blackouts and directly engage with global audiences. Digital nationalism defined as the use of online platforms to construct, disseminate, and sustain nationalist discourse has become a crucial strategy for Baloch separatists.

Hashtags like #FreeBalochistan and #BalochGenocide have frequently trended, often following reported incidents of military operations, enforced disappearances, or targeted killings. In response, state actors have attempted to control the narrative through surveillance, platform takedowns, and legal actions such

as the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (PECA). This paper investigates how Baloch nationalist groups have used social media from 2020 to 2025 to shape a distinct digital resistance identity, influence international discourse, and challenge state narratives. By analyzing content, user networks, and patterns of engagement, the study sheds light on the evolving intersection of insurgency and information warfare.

### **Background and Literature Review**

Baloch nationalism is rooted in a long-standing struggle for autonomy, dating back to the forced accession of the Kalat State into Pakistan in 1948 (Harrison, 1981). Since then, Baloch insurgents have launched multiple waves of armed resistance, with the latest phase emerging post-2006 following the killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti. Scholars such as Paul Titus and Nina Swidler (2000) and Malik Siraj Akbar (2011) have highlighted the ethno-nationalist, economic, and resource-based grievances underpinning the conflict.

While earlier movements relied heavily on tribal leadership and print media, the emergence of digital technologies has transformed the insurgent communication landscape. As state control over traditional media increased particularly after the 2016 ban on Baloch media outlets Baloch activists began leveraging social media to bypass censorship (Ahmed, 2022).

Recent literature on digital insurgency (Howard et al., 2011; Tufekci, 2017) emphasizes how marginalized groups use online platforms to mobilize support, construct collective memory, and document human rights abuses. In the Baloch case, social media functions as both a tactical tool and a symbolic space where digital martyrdom, resistance imagery, and real-time violence are constructed and circulated. However, empirical studies focusing specifically on Baloch digital nationalism remain scarce. Most existing research either treats the region as a monolith in broader Pakistan insurgency studies or focuses on offline dynamics. This paper fills this gap by analyzing the discursive strategies, reach, and consequences of Baloch separatist messaging on social media platforms over a defined five-year period.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws upon two complementary theoretical frameworks: Digital Nationalism Theory and Framing Theory, which together offer a comprehensive lens for analyzing the strategic use of social media by Baloch separatist actors.

**Digital Nationalism** refers to the utilization of digital platforms to construct, promote, and sustain nationalist ideologies in virtual spaces (Milošević, 2020). It extends Benedict Anderson's (1983) foundational concept of "imagined communities" into the digital era, wherein national identities are constructed through shared online content such as hashtags, memes, videos, and real-time updates despite geographic dispersion. These online communities do not simply replicate offline identities but can even constitute new sites of political consciousness, especially for marginalized or stateless individuals (Anderson & Rainie, 2014).

In the case of Baloch digital activism, social media platforms such as Twitter (now X) and YouTube are not simply conduits through which to connect with audiences but sites of cultural production and cultural resistance, where distinct Baloch nationalist identities have been cultivated and asserted. Digital nationalism theories provide insights into how a stateless community like the Baloch may envision itself as a member of united political community, through digital connections, despite having little access to state-modeled, traditional media.

In order to examine the particular content strategies utilized by Baloch digital activists, this study also employs Goffman's (1974) and Entman's (1993) Framing Theory which consists of how problems are framed and how it functions as a way of motivating representation and interpretation. Entman argues that

repeated successful frames include four basic functions; defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies. Based on Entman's functions, this study can demonstrate how Baloch activists frame narratives of victimhood, repression, legitimacy, and transnational solidarity. Put together, these two theories present a significant model for analyzing how digital spheres or tools affect the content and reach of modern insurgent movements.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research utilizes a qualitative content framework, augmented by digital ethnography, to investigate the ways in which Baloch separatist narratives have transformed and spread across social media from 2020 to 2025. The research design is rooted in interpretivist epistemology, which values context-specific meaning-making and the lived experience of marginalized groups (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

### **Data Collection**

The primary data source is social media content, including tweets, videos, and public posts from platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and Telegram. Using hashtags such as #FreeBalochistan, #BalochGenocide, and #BalochMissingPersons, a purposive sample of 1,000 tweets, 30 YouTube videos, and selected Telegram threads were gathered. The selection prioritized engagement, relevance, and representativeness across the 2020–2025 timeline.

### **Content Analysis and Coding:**

Using NVivo 15 software, the content was coded inductively and deductively. Entman's (1993) four framing functions guided the deductive coding, while emergent codes were identified through open coding. The qualitative framing analysis focused on identifying repeated themes and symbolic motifs that reinforce separatist messaging. Key variables included use of imagery, martyrdom language, and international appeals.

### **Network Analysis**

To understand the reach and influence of digital actors, a social network analysis was conducted using NodeXL. This helped map key influencers, cluster dynamics, and the centrality of diaspora voices within digital mobilization.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The study adheres strictly to ethical research standards. Only publicly available data were used, with no attempts to contact or engage with users. Anonymity of user identities has been preserved in all descriptions and citations. As digital activism in Balochistan intersects with high-security risks, additional precautions were taken to avoid any harm or traceability.

### **Validity and Limitations**

Triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing findings across platforms and through thematic saturation. However, limitations include the inability to access encrypted private group communications and the platform-dependent visibility bias (Tufekci, 2017). This mixed digital-ethnographic approach allows the study to go beyond surface-level content review, uncovering deeper narrative structures and power dynamics in the Baloch separatist digital ecosystem.

## **FINDINGS & RESULTS**

The research uncovered a sophisticated and emotionally resonant digital discourse around Baloch separatism, shaped by a strategic use of framing, platform-specific behavior, and engagement tactics. The

results are presented in three thematic categories: dominant narrative frames, platform usage, and digital engagement.

### **Dominant Frames in Baloch Digital Discourse**

The qualitative content analysis illuminated four significant frames through which Baloch nationalist activism organizes its digital narrative; each of these frames are used, in various iterations, across platforms to mobilize support, and identify Baloch distinctiveness, ultimately eliciting feelings of solidarity from readers.

### **Victimhood and Martyrdom**

A large portion of the posts we examined focused on themes of suffering, injustice and collective trauma. Posts in this frame included many posts featuring images of bodies covered in shrouds, funeral procession images, and even images of bereaved family members. In many cases, these posts were accompanied by captions consisting of Poetry, religious metaphors, or calls to action. Posts in this frame often showcased enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, especially where the actors were members of Pakistan's security apparatus. Hashtags like #BalochGenocide, #BalochMissingPersons, and #StateTerrorism also accompanied posts in this frame. These memorial posts help situate victims in practical relations to political loss, humanize victims and create lines of continuity in the nationalist struggle, even potentially designating them martyrs. The emotionality helped stir audiences and served to reinforce a collective sense of injustice shared among Baloch and sympathetic viewers alike.

### **State Repression and Militarization**

The second dominant frame presented the Pakistani state, especially the military establishment, as occupying and responsible for systemic violence through colonial-like practices in Balochistan. The authorship and diction element of this frame referred to the "Punjabi army", "military colonization", and "state terrorism" designations to describe the state and its actions, individually and collectively, as illegitimate and colonial. Activists shared satellite imagery showing military checkpoints, amateur drone footage, and illicitly leaked videos, in an effort to visually support claims of militarization. Posts also documented actions alleged to have killed civilians, often making calls for international action to investigate militarization. The military evidence frame became amplified after military action, such as crackdowns, raids, or disappearances, which facilitated calls for an international examination of human rights abuses.

### **Cultural and Historical Legitimacy**

Many users drew upon Balochistan's cultural heritage to establish legitimacy for their separatist discourse, and create a sense of nationhood. Often posts drew distinction by featuring historical figures such as Mir Chakar Khan, Nawab Akbar Bugti, and Nawab Nauroz Khan, constructed as freedom fighters within a history of struggle. Posts used hashtags such as #BalochHistory, #BalochiLanguage, and #FreeBalochistan, and awareness imagery of Baloch flags, traditional dress, or music that claimed and constructed pride of being Baloch. These posts acted as digital monuments to assert the region's unique socio-political history, and draw attention to its distinctiveness against the homogenized national history constructed by the state.

### **Transnational Solidarity**

1. A relatively prevalent trend in diaspora-posted accounts was the concerted effort to place the Baloch struggle in the context of global anti-colonial and human rights activism. Activists made obvious connections with Palestine, Kurdistan, and Kashmir, framing Balochistan alongside these examples of neocolonialism as another chapter in the Global South's fight against oppression.

2. Postings frequently tagged organizations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, or the United Nations, and called upon hashtags like #DecolonizeBalochistan or #GlobalSouthSolidarity. This strategy had the dual purpose of gaining international visibility and elevating the Baloch cause by using similar reasoning as a cause where support was already gained into a route of legitimacy.

### **Platform-Specific Trajectories**

- The study also uncovered distinct trajectories affiliated with respect to various social media platforms where each played a role within the Baloch digital resistance ecosystem:
- Twitter (now X) emerged as the central node for real-time political communication where activists organized hashtag campaigns, reacted to breaking stories, and targeted global audiences. Twitter's speed and virality allowed for trending narratives and potential international visibility.
- Telegram was utilized mostly as a secure backend network for organizing events, sharing video footage that had not been censored and/or for keeping anonymity. Private channels allowed for more candid discussions, amongst organizers and avoided the mainstream censoring.
- YouTube functioned as a store for long-form products such as interviews with exiled leaders, documentaries, guerrilla survivor storytelling, and some political engagement commentary. Videos allowed for longer storytelling, but also provided a site for providing historical context that was generally missing in shorter posts.
- Although less prominent in the global conversation, Facebook was still widely used by local users in Pakistan, and was often used for community-level engagement, such as memorial posts, Balochi poetry, and cultural commemorate celebrations. Even though Facebook was less politically visible, it was still used as a tool to assert the collective identity in its local usage.

### **Engagement Metrics**

It is important to consider that the analysis indicated relatively high levels of visibility for Baloch digital activism - particularly in moments of crisis or during a major protest activity:

1. In an average time period, there was at least seven times when the hashtag #BalochGenocide trended globally between 2022 and 2024, often following a mass abduction, or military operation reports. Each hashtag trend was usually accompanied by images, links to videos, and personal statements from witnesses with stories; all of which created emotional engagement.
2. Diaspora-based accounts were among the most influential, particularly during events like the Baloch Long March (2023): often taking over 10,000 retweets, thousands of comments, and resulting in major media coverage. All the notable spikes in engagement were aligned with at the physical protest or advocacy event happening, demonstrating a strong online-offline interaction with some degree of success (if only in the diaspora network).
3. Posts that either included an image or were images of the various themes: missing persons; mourning families; armed confrontations; were much more likely to garner higher engagement compared to plain text (standing alone); demonstrating the importance of affective visual framing in digital advocacy.

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The digital world allowed Baloch activists to create what can be described as a parallel nation in the cloud - an imagined community without a geographic limit, but rather connected through trauma, cultural identity, and political resistance. This continued the work of Benedict Anderson (1983) and his imagined



communities concept, where a nation is imagined by shared experiences and symbols, here through tweets, videos, and hashtags. Baloch digital nationalism is participatory, decentralized, and transnational as opposed to territorial nationalism. Digital platforms like Twitter and YouTube allow local activists, members of the diaspora, and international sympathizers to collaboratively produce and sustain the ongoing narrative of resistance.

Within this digital space, Baloch activists experience 'real-time production of grievance' as scholars have identified, a swift action to document disappearances, killings, or protests, and immediately analyze it through the narrow frame of systemic oppression. In other words, Baloch digital actors develop collectively produced narratives of grief together while Tinder-naming and documenting grievances that imagine the Baloch have agency and voice, thus altering how they exist as an oppressed people. Baloch digital activists bypass state-based means of media coverage and develop a counterpublic (Fraser, 1990), or alternative space to discuss pressing issues of justice, and talk or otherwise produce oppositional narratives that challenge the hegemonic frame of the state.

However, this surge in digital activism has provoked a repressive response from the Pakistani state. The use of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) has expanded, enabling authorities to detain or harass online dissenters (Digital Rights Foundation, 2022). Surveillance technologies monitor activists' digital footprints, while platform-level suspensions sometimes prompted by state reporting—have limited the reach of key voices (Amnesty International, 2023). Additionally, state-backed disinformation campaigns routinely brand Baloch activists as “foreign-funded” or “anti-national,” contributing to public hostility and delegitimization of their demands (Awan, 2021).

Those efforts are likely to exacerbate polarization. As Baloch digital communities become increasingly organized around their perspectives, their narratives are countered by backlash in broader Pakistani spaces dominated by nationalist engagement. Instead of inspiring engagement, state repression strengthens the activists' narrative of exclusion and alienation, continuing to divide them. There is also a significant gap between online advocacy and offline change. The particular structural realities of Balochistan, characterized by low internet availability, high illiteracy, and a fear of state reprisal, limit action at the grassroots level even after successful digital mobilization (Baloch & Hoodbhoy, forthcoming). Too much reliance on diaspora voices involves beneficially broadening the field of struggle through internationalization, but it risks disconnecting from the realities on the ground, which dilutes the applicability of some narratives to local contexts (Riaz, 2020).

These challenges illustrate a significant tension within digital nationalism: while it provides unparalleled visibility and solidarity, its sustainability must bridge the gap between the online/virtual and the physical realms of resistance.

## **PROPOSED SOLUTIONS**

The implications of the rise of Baloch separatist narratives on social media warrant a constructive and rights based response that engages dissent without coercion or censorship.

To begin with, the state should engage with digital dissent with the approach of dialogue and transparency, rather than relying on broad based censorship and social media blackouts. In fact, if the state simply suppresses online grievances, it does nothing but deepen resentment and provides greater legitimacy to separatist accusations of systemic marginalization and silencing. By being more transparent with communication and in the message, the state can limit the effectiveness of insurgent narratives.

Second, there is an urgent need to expand digital literacy and access in the space of Balochistan. There are still many regions that do not offer the connectivity needed to maximize the diversity of voices accessed in the digital spaces. While there are ongoing initiatives to increase connectivity, accessibility and agency

over the narrative of the Baloch consume for minoritized groups; especially women and youth; can bolster intra-community dialogue and improve the narrative.

Third, in order to develop effective counter-narratives, the basis of which requires credibility. State effort communications should be based on authentic community voices from the Baloch community, including scholars, development workers, teachers and activists. Community based storytelling will give the state story depth while also humanizing both the effort and state stronger than just an official perspective/proclaimed narrative or official press briefing.

Fourth, state attempts should work collaboratively with a number of platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Meta (Facebook and Instagram), and YouTube to cultivate a reporting mechanism that is transparent, respects human rights, and ultimately achieves a message of peace and reconciliation. Baloch human rights defenders and digital activists often become victims through false flagging, take down campaigns, and online harassment. Ensuring for their online safety and processes would continue to provide a shield for legitimate voices and space for the digital public sphere.

Ultimately, a deeper inquiry is needed on the character, patterns, and impacts of digital grievance expression in Balochistan. Initiatives such as longitudinal studies conducted by independent think tanks, universities, and civil society actors can add useful pamphlets. The state should prioritize open data and evidence-based interventions in order to move from a reactive model of suppression to pro-actively engaging with the layered realities of digital nationalism.

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