



RESEARCH PAPER

Analyzing the Escalation and De-Escalation Framing in Pakistani Dailies: A Case of Baluchistan

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ABSTRACT

Balochistan, Pakistan's largest province, is the least developed, with citizens' dissatisfaction and animosity being key traits. The current study examines the media treatment of the unrest in Balochistan between December 2022 and December 2023 by applying a content analysis technique, comparing de-escalation and escalation framing through purposive sampling. The leading English dailies Dawn and Quetta-based indigenous The Balochistan Times frame the conflict in terms of human rights, politics, and socio-economic injustices, while Urdu-language newspapers Jang and Intekhab construct it in terms of biopolitical security and legal order. The study suggests a de-escalation framing; pro-people and non-partisan frames should be overwhelmingly penned in national dailies as compared to escalation frames; differences among people, unpleasant happenings without logical context. The study emphasizes the importance of local and international media coverage in addressing the fundamental problems facing Balochistan and inspiring a well-rounded strategy considering the socioeconomic, geopolitical, and political realities of the area.

KEYWORDS Balochistan, Deescalation, escalation, Human Rights, Media Framing

Introduction

Balochistan, a strategically located province in Pakistan, faces political marginalization, economic exploitation, and rights abuses. Despite its rich history, it is the most impoverished province in the country. This study investigates the media's role in reporting Balochistan, focusing on four leading Pakistani dailies from December 2022 to December 2023. The research aims to understand the mediapolitical function in the Balochistan conflict and policy-making. This research aims to find how the Pakistani media play their role to promote peace and share suggestions to solve complex issues in Balochistan, Pakistan, the least developed province. It occupies 44% of the country's land and generates 6.2% of the national population. Balochistan's cultural affiliation with Mehrgarh civilizations dates back around 9000 years, making it the least populated province in the country. Balochistan, a region in Pakistan, has historically been inhabited by various groups, including Persians, Macedonians, Arabs, Ghaznis, Afghans, Mongols, and Mughals. The British claimed suzerainty over Balochistan since 1839. Balochistan has strategic links with Afghanistan and Iran, but coastal areas were under Arab States jurisdiction until the late 1960s. Since 1971, Balochistan has had minimal political and economic influence, making it the least developed area in Pakistan. Balochistan, located near Afghanistan and Iran, has strategic importance due to its strategic location and proximity to the Arabian Sea coast. However, the province has become a hub of political, economic, and social rivalry, leading to conflicts such as human rights violations, enforced disappearances, and lack of effective political representation. Ethnic and sectarian conflicts have further exacerbated the situation. Despite efforts to negotiate and

develop, the root issues remain unresolved. A recent development is, of course, a Baloch Yakjety committee taking a collective action where Balach Mola Bakhsh was killed by the CTD counter-terrorism department in a mock encounter, just before his acquittal by the session court. The continuity of this situation could be explained by the lack of an adequate legal model that would make forced disappearances a genuine crime and protect against impunity of security forces. The UN and other global organizations have expressed serious concerns on this issue and have urged the Pakistani government to put into practice a number of Newspapers like Jang and Intekhab often portray the Baloch insurgency as a state security issue, presenting militants as terrorists or threats to Pakistan's legitimacy. This may justify force and oppressive security measures, leading to escalation of positions and denying a peaceful end to the conflict. The media's presentation is influenced by socio-political factors like state censorship policies, political bias, and ownership rights. This raises questions about the media's ability to exercise independent operation and act as a fair referee in the conflict (Ishaq, Mukhtar, & Manzoor, 2020, Ishaq, Hussain & Haroon, 2023; Muzaffar, Karamat & Saeed, 2018). Balochistan's political volatility and lack of elected officers have led to insignificant progress in restoring justice to victims and their families. This has increased the isolation of the Baloch populace and fueled resentment against the ruling power. Baloch nationalist parties have limited capacity to make federal decisions and are seen as inadequately represented on the national front. Poor political leadership and economic backwardness in Baluchistan have contributed to the ongoing insecurity and frustration among the Baloch population. The paper explores the media's portrayal of the Balochistan conflict, focusing on its internal and external perceptions. English and Urdu language press framing influences public opinion, with English dailies like Dawn and Baluchistan Times focusing on civil liberties and governance. Urdu-language broadsheets Jang and Intekhab, on the other hand, rally larger audiences and adopt a policy-populist approach. The study suggests that media representation of the Balochistan issue impacts public opinion and policy making. Media framing plays a crucial role in shaping perception and policy in the Balochistan issue. The Balochistan Times effectively portrays the real experiences of the Baloch community, highlighting economic and social grievances like the Gwadar protest. This contrasts with national media platforms like Jang and Intekhab, which portray comparative incidents as threats to national security. This study explores how media framing influences perceptions and policies related to the Balochistan conflict in Pakistan. It contributes to literature on media's role as a force magnifier or de-escalator, affecting peace and conflict, ethical journalism, and minority perception. It also explores language, media orientation, and conflict framing. The technical goal of this study is to critically evaluate coverage of the Balochistan conflict by key Pakistani dailies and subsequently categorize the coverage as inclined toward the perception of escalation or de-escalation of grievances. This study aims at letting out the latent linguistics, and sociopolitical semiotics that pervade the readership's mindset by evaluating the assortment of the recent newspaper articles, editorial commentaries, and opinion pieces collected from the English, Urdu, and Balochi press within the period between December 2022 and December 2023. This paper seeks to establish the effect of media with regard to the extension, sustenance, or containment of conflict with a view of identifying whether media either influences conflict or fosters effective communication and peace. By so doing, it seeks to improve understanding of media ethics in light of the conflict reporting. The media's portrayal of issues like missing persons, ethnic conflicts, and corruption in Pakistan significantly influences people's feelings and policy decisions. There is a lack of literature on Balochistan's representation in Pakistani newspapers. This research aims to analyze war and peace portrayals in leading newspapers and determine any bias, trend, or outcome.

Literature Review

Media treatment of issues like restlessness, sectarian clashes and major grievances vary from peace or war according its priorities(Ishaq, Noshina, 2018). The study by Baloch, and Tahir (2014) highlights the lack of media coverage in Balochistan, Pakistan's largest province, due to ethnic, sectarian, and complex conflicts. The authors argue for improved coverage and security for journalists in conflict regions, suggesting media portrayal plays a crucial role in conflict resolution and the overall situation. Hoodbhoy's column discusses complex issues in Balochistan, including media control, underdevelopment, smuggling, and imbalance between Baluchi people and officials. Female students in Gwadar actively fight against government indifference, while minor problems dominate media. Gwadar Institute of Technology is portrayed as lacking in depth and poorly run, with rampant smuggling and corruption. Hoodbhoy (2023) highlights a large-scale ill understanding and handling of Balochistan by the powers, potentially causing serious consequences.

Abbas (2023) academic writing explores the changing political landscape in Balochistan, focusing on young, educated, middle-class citizens protesting against injustice and enforced disappearances. She highlights the shift from tribal leadership to an updated generation using social media to expose government suppression. The insurgency is shifting, with an emerging middle class replacing tribal sardars. Protest camps, particularly in Islamabad, attract young, educated women, reflecting the advanced participation of women in Balochistan's political stratum. Noor suggests that relying on prehistoric approaches may lead to a state out of socioeconomic and political sync

Ahmad (2023) academic study examines the Supreme Court of Pakistan's efforts to address the issue of missing people and forced disappearances. Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa emphasizes cooperation as the key to a resolution. The court's three-judge bench addressed a petition filed by former senator Aitzaz Ahsan, arguing that enforced disappearance violates constitutional rights. The petition also criticizes the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearities for disregarding legal and procedural standards. CJP Isa emphasized the importance of not politicizing the issue.

Ali (2023) highlights the frequent enforced disappearances in Balochistan, highlighting the deep emotional impact on families whose relatives are declared missing. The practice is a common occurrence, with victims often being political leaders, journalists, human rights defenders, or students. Aziz (2023) stories highlight the grave psychosocial traumas caused by these cases, causing families to live in fear and uncertainty. The article critiques the human suffering associated with enforced disappearances and calls for immediate action to address this issue.

Balochistan, Pakistan's largest province, is underreported in the media due to competing agendas and ethnic tensions. Hood Bhoy (2023)., a scientist and writer, reveals complex issues such as media control, underdevelopment, smuggling, and poor local standards. The author contrasts the apathy of students in advanced areas with the activism of female students in Gwadar. The government regulates and suppresses news about Balochistan, highlighting the neglect of issues like enforced disappearances and violent acts. Maulana Hidayat-ur-R Rahman, an influential personality from Gwadar, condemns this attitude. The region is deeply corrupt with smuggling and disoriented military performance.

The Baloch Yakjehti Committee has been protesting against state atrocities and demanding justice for missing persons in Balochistan. Forced disappearances are common, targeting people of all walks of life, including political workers, journalists, human rights defenders, and students. The movement involves families of missing persons, political and social activists, and strict road restrictions. The Voice for Baloch Missing Persons (VBMP) has supported these rallies for over ten years. The scale of the problem is understated by the Pakistani government and military, with conflicting reports of the number of missing people. The article reveals the psychological and social consequences of forced removals, as families continue to live in fear and uncertainty about their loved ones' fate. The paper suggests that enforced disappearance is part of a broader state strategy to suppress political opposition and weaken the Baloch struggle

Balochistan, a province in Pakistan, has been facing a worsening law enforcement situation and assertive political demands that pose a risk of destabilization. Baloch nationalism aims to preserve the Baloch identity while protecting the rights of the general populace in the pursuit of provincial and national development. The province has experienced recurring instances of nationalist terrorism, particularly in the south-eastern region, particularly in the tribal communities. The Umbreen Javaid 116 conflict, characterized by ethno-nationalist sentiments, has been a significant manifestation of a terrorist menace to Pakistan (Muzaffar, Khan & Yaseen, 2021).

The Voice for Baloch Missing Persons reports an estimated 7,000 instances of individuals who have gone missing in Balochistan since 2004. The government-convened Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances reported 2,752 verified cases of enforced disappearances in the province as of January 2024. The recent efforts of Nawaz Sharif to enlist eligible candidates from the BAP and other political parties into the PML-N shed light on the persistent problem of political instability in Balochistan. The historical context of political instability highlights the ineffectiveness of depending on individuals who have betrayed public trust. To effectively tackle the political crisis in Balochistan, it is imperative for national parties and Islamabad to acknowledge their responsibility in prolonging governance issues faced by the province, rather than unilaterally attributing blame to the local population.

Material and Methods

This study uses quantitative content analysis (QCA) to analyze the Balochistan framing in four popular Pakistani newspapers, Dawn, The Balochistan Times, Jang, and Intekhab, from December 2022 to December 2023. The research focuses on the narratives these media use to emphasize either a peaceful or military solution to the Balochistan conflict. Dawn and The Balochistan Times are known for their concern with human rights and reconciliation, while Jang and daily Intekhab deal with law and order and national security issues. The study aims to provide an extensive analysis of pertinent coverage during a year marked by major political developments, warfare, and demonstrations. The study aims to illustrate media framing's effects on attitude shifts and discourses, affecting the Balochistan conflict solutioning mechanisms.

This study examines the Balochistan conflict in Pakistani media through the lens of Dawn, The Balochistan Times, Jang, and Intekhab. Dawn, an English-language newspaper, is known for its moderate to liberal stance and emphasis on human rights. The Balochistan Times, a regional newspaper, focuses on regional issues like human rights abuses and socio-economic injustice. Jang, a widely circulated Urdu newspaper, emphasizes national security and obedience of law, while Intekhab, a regional Balochistan newspaper, provides local sentiment and national security concerns. The

selection of newspapers allows for cross-linguistic comparison and analysis of media framing based on ideological predispositions, language, editorial policy position, and readership demographics. This method helps understand how media influences people's perception and political dialog on the Balochistan conflict. The study aims to capture the broad aspect of framing and gain a better understanding of how media influences people's perception and political dialog. This study used a purposive sampling approach to identify articles discussing the Balochistan conflict, human rights, escalation of grievances, de-escalation of conflicts, or related themes. Criteria included articles discussing insurgency, military operations, protests, human rights violations, peace negotiations, editorial opinion pieces, news reports, and feature articles. Content analysis was used to study framing and themes within the conflict in Balochistan.

Table 1
Evaluating escalation and De-escalation Framing in Pakistani Dailies on the Balochistan Issue

Categories		Coding Categories for Frames
Escalation frame	Pro-elite coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focused on statements from government leaders, military officials, and state institutions • Portrays the Baloch insurgents as security threats to national stability • Emphasizes central authority and national integrity
De-escalation frame	Pro-People coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on local Baloch communities, activists, and students as sources • Highlights the voices of local leaders and grassroots perspectives • Emphasizes the needs, hardships, and human rights of Baloch civilians
Escalation frames	Difference-oriented	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlights ideological, ethnic, and cultural differences between the Baloch and the state • Discusses separatist demands in contrast with national identity • Frames grievances as defiance against the state
De-escalation frame	Reports Areas of Agreement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlights dialogue initiatives between Baloch representatives and government • Points to shared goals, such as economic development and peace • Promotes narratives that advocate for reconciliation and mutual understanding
Escalation frame	Spontaneous reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasizes the immediate events of conflict, focusing on insurgency activities and counteractions by the military • Minimizes historical or socio-economic causes of conflict • Reports mainly on military operations without broader context
De-escalation	Context-oriented Reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discusses the historical grievances, economic exclusion, and political disenfranchisement as roots of the conflict • Highlights the negative impacts of military operations on civilian life • Considers the potential long-term consequences if grievances remain unaddressed

De-escalation	Avoids Labeling Good/Bad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portrays both Baloch groups and state representatives with neutrality, focusing on their interests and perspectives • Avoids characterizing the conflict in black-and-white terms • Frames the conflict as complex and multi-faceted
Escalation	Partisan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly aligns with the government's position, supporting military interventions • Justifies military presence and security measures in Balochistan • Minimizes grievances of the Baloch populace, framing them as unfounded or exaggerated
De-escalation	Non-partisan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintains objectivity by including perspectives from both the government and the Baloch community • Balances coverage by reporting on military actions and local grievances • Emphasizes the importance of unbiased reporting for peace-building

The table analyzes Pakistan dailies' reporting on the Balochistan conflict, categorizing it into War Journalism or Peace Journalism. It helps evaluate articles from Dawn, The Balochistan Times, Jang, and Intekhab to determine if they represent war-related or peace reporting. The coding process involves sorting content into relevant categories, themes, frames, and narratives, using framing theory concepts from Goffman and Entman.

Escalation Frame: Characterization of the conflict in terms of security, military, insurgency or terrorism.

De-escalation Frame: Concerns underlying communication, compromise, finding middle ground, and nonviolent conflict management.

Human Rights Frame: Pay attention to torture, kidnapping, or discrimination, inequality in development, or the distribution of wealth.

Development Frame: Reporting of developmental schemes, investments and state programs to address the complaints in Balochistan.

Table 2
Treatment of Balochistan issue in National dailies from December 2022 to Decemer 2023

Treatment of issues	Editorials	columns
Dawn	09 (9.8%)	15(12.4%)
Jang	11(12.08%)	21(17.35%)
Balochistan Times	32(35.1%)	39(32.2%)
Daily Intikhab	39(42.8%)	46(38.01%)
Total	91	121

Table 3
Treatment of Balochistan issue in editorials of National dailies according to escalation and de-escalation

Treatment of issues regarding Frames	Escalation Frames	Deescalation Frames
Pro-elite coverage/ Pro-people coverage	09 (13.04%)	17(32.7%)
Spontenouse coverage/ context-oriented	31(44.9%)	19(36.5%)
Labeling others/non labeling others	22(31.8%)	11(21.1%)
Partisian/ non- Partisian	07(10.14%)	05(9.6%)
Total	69	52

Table 04
Treatment of Balochistan issue in columns of National dailies according to escalation and de-escalation

Treatment of issues regarding Frames	Escalation Frames	Deescalation Frames
Pro-elite coverage/ Pro-people coverage	19 (52.7%)	17(30.9%)
Spontenouse coverage/ context-oriented	12 (33.3%)	16(29.09%)
Labeling others/non labeling others	02(5.5%)	09(16.4%)
Partisian/ non- Partisian	03(08.3%)	13(23.6%)
Total	36	55

The findings revealed that leading Pakistani dailies penned 91 editorials about the Balochistan issue and 121 columns were being published between December 2022 and December 2023 in Dawn, The Balochistan Times, Jang, and Intekhab. The study found significant disparities in framing patterns across the newspapers, 19 (52.7%) editorials sought information about issue to administrative elites and marginalized people perspective. Whereas, only 17(30.9%) editorials highlighted the sufferings of common citizens. These newspapers often portrayed the conflict as a human interest question rather than a security concern, advocating for policies addressing the cause of conflict rather than more complex security ones.

The different framing patterns have implications for public perception, as they may construct a story that sanctions sympathy toward the Baloch people and enhance public pressure for pacific strategies against the state. 31(44.9%) opinion pieces discuss about the Balocistan issue in their columns associated with certain happening; strike, protest, blast, or any military operations. On the other hand, 17(32.7%) columns in all four leading dailies, articulated human sufferings, trumas, unrestlessness in the region. The media framing also influences policy-making, as distinct stories can help or hinder policymakers in adopting or rejecting the state's approach to conflict solution (Ishaq, Noshina, & Hanan, 2018). The human rights and peace frames formulated by Dawn and The Balochistan Times contain calls to policy actions that respond to the political-structural roots of the Baloch insurgency, while Jang and Intekhab justify policies favoring security and force solutions. Socio-political factors influencing media framing include state control, media ownership, language, and users of the media. Existing laws make restrictions on media freedom stronger in Pakistan, leading to threats and censorship for journalists discussing the Balochistan conflict.

Conclusion

This research study has carried out an analysis of the coverage of the Balochistan problem within four leading Pakistani dailies for the period of one year from December 2022 to December 2023. The main purpose, therefore, is to assess how these newspapers build their stories on war and peace. The present study serves a useful purpose to understanding how the media has helped to construct the conflict and peace accounts in the less understood milieu of Balochistan. The preliminary research shows that there could be much disparity in the given amount of coverage of Balochistan in the selected daily newspapers. While some of the media tend to focus on investments in the region, the positive actions of the authorities to promote and establish development and maintain peace, others emphasize the continuous problems of violence, human rights abuses, and governance challenges. The observed duality in framing shows that the media representations are constructed by the editorial policies, political affiliations and the institutional context that a newspaper exists in.

The distinction of the concerns in Balochistan as to whether they are either a prospect for growth or an ongoing war has major implications for the opinion of the

public as well as the policies that are being made. While presenting the Balochistan issue as a struggle, closer narratives that routinely connect enforced disappearances, ethnic conflict, and corruption. The above-mentioned framing is in parallel with the wider generalizing narrative of Balochistan as being a problematic region in terms of governance and human rights. The aforesaid depictions may help to consolidate the view of Balochistan as a region of instability and conflict and may influence the internal and external perception, as well as local and international visions and policies. On the other hand, the depiction of Balochistan as an area of potentiality zeroes in on the potential opportunities linked with economic developments, industrialization, and increased supply of capital. This focus provides attention on efforts and activities regarding problem-solving implemented by the government as well as stress on the role of Balochistan in the overall development of the country. This kind of framing aimed at sensationalistic and positive messages that attempt to reorient the audience's attention towards potential gains from the peace and prosperity, and thus, gain more support and resources for the region. The methods in which the issues in Balochistan are portrayed in the media reflect current national discourses of narratives and politics. The emphasis that is given to the conflict or development side of Balochistan can color people's perceptions, policymakers' decisions, and international attitudes towards the situation in Balochistan. For instance, while the use of positive frames can create support for governmental agendas and funding, frames that center around conflict may attract international attention and human rights issues.

Moreover, the research supports the role played by media in constructing the conversation about Balochistan by its focus on some aspects of the issue. This focus on economic development and investment opportunities can lead to the portrayal of Balochistan as a region on the path to progress. While this focus on violence and human rights issues may keep alive a story of conflict and threat. The choices made in framings have implications for the potential understanding of the basic facts by the public and the effectiveness of measures adopted with reference to policies. Thus, the way the media portrays Balochistan as a challenge or an opportunity is burdened with a great deal of importance in terms of public communication and decision-making policies. The majority of Pakistani dailies covered Balochistan's grievances with a pro-people stance and penned to solve all issues through negotiation (Hussain, 2015). Thus, the range of framing in newspapers can be explained not only by differences in their orientations but also by different sets of viewpoints and concerns that newspapers represent depending on existing political, economic, and social conditions. Balochistan deteriorated law and order situation was mostly aligned with bad governance, partial judiciary system and poor treatment of forces to locals, whereas marginalized foreign proxy involvement and native Baloch's attitude towards acknowledging national unity (Alam & Jhalandhary, 2019), According to Ishaq and Saleem's (2018) research, state policies navigate the coverage of certain events as well as their particular leaning. To address these complex issues, it is crucial to gain proper understanding of these framing dynamics that require broader insight into Balochistan's complexity and the foreign policy-making process, alternatively the formal decision-making process in policy formulation. Future research is needed to relate the frame construction to the perception by the public and effect on policies, especially in the regions that endure conflicts and have factors hindering development. Thus, having a chance to unveil the patterns of interacting narratives and results, scholars are provided with a chance to enrich our understanding of complex media architectures and their impact on and representation of socio-political realities.

Recommendations

The distinction of the concerns in Balochistan as to whether they are either a prospect for growth or ongoing grievances has major implications for the opinion of the public as well as the policies that are being made. While presenting the Balochistan issue as a struggle, closer narratives that routinely connect enforced disappearances, ethnic conflict, and corruption. The above-mentioned framing is in parallel with the wider generalizing narrative of Balochistan as being a problematic region in terms of governance and human rights. The aforesaid depictions may help to consolidate the view of Balochistan as a region of instability and conflict and may influence the internal and external perception, as well as local and international visions and policies. On the other hand, the depiction of Balochistan as an area of potentiality zeroes in on the potential opportunities linked with economic developments, industrialization, and increased supply of capital. This focus provides attention on efforts and activities regarding problem-solving implemented by the government as well as stress on the role of Balochistan in the overall development of the country. This kind of framing aimed at sensationalistic and positive messages that attempt to reorient the audience's attention towards potential gains from the peace and prosperity, and thus, gain more support and resources for the region. The methods in which the issues in Balochistan are portrayed in the media reflect current national discourses of narratives and politics. The emphasis that is given to the conflict or development side of Balochistan can color people's perceptions, policymakers' decisions, and international attitudes towards the situation in Balochistan. For instance, while the use of positive frames can create support for governmental agendas and funding, frames that center around conflict may attract international attention and human rights issues.

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