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Political Fragmentation and Ethnic Cohesion: Understanding Intra-Pashtun Stratification and Its Implications for Social and Political Mobilization

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the complex dynamics of political fragmentation and ethnic cohesion within Pakistan's Pashtun community, focusing on how intra-Pashtun stratification influences contemporary Pashtun political mobilization. While previous studies have examined state-ethnic relations, limited attention has been given to the internal sociopolitical divisions that shape Pashtun collective action. This study argues that the fragmentation of Pashtun political loyalties dispersed among parties such as PTI, JUI-F, and ANP serves as a significant barrier to achieving a unified mobilization agenda. Adopting a qualitative case study approach informed by constructivist theory, political opportunity structure, and frame analysis, the research highlights that Pashtun identity operates as a fluid and contested construct rather than a fixed ethnic category. Findings indicate that efforts to build ethnic solidarity are persistently challenged by deep-seated partisan identities and localized political affiliations, which dilute broader mobilization efforts. The analysis underscores that the struggle for ethnic cohesion is not merely an organizational objective but the very site of political contestation where internal divisions can undermine the potential for collective empowerment as much as external pressures from the state.

Keywords: Pashtun Politics, Political Fragmentation, Ethnic Cohesion, Intra-Ethnic Stratification, Political Mobilization, Pakistan, Constructivism, Identity Politics

Introduction

The Pashtuns, one of the world's largest tribal societies with an estimated population of 38 million in Pakistan alone, form a significant ethnic group predominantly residing in the northwestern regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and northern Balochistan (Yusufzai, 2018). Historically, their socio-political structures have been defined by an intricate tribal system (Pashtunwali) and a history of resisting central authority, a context further complicated by the legacy of the colonial Durand Line that divides their traditional homeland between Pakistan and Afghanistan (Johnson & Mason, 2008). The socio-political context for contemporary Pashtuns has been profoundly shaped by decades of conflict, including the war in Afghanistan and subsequent Pakistani military operations in the tribal areas, which resulted in widespread displacement, thousands of fatalities, and enforced disappearances (Amnesty International, 2024). It was from this crucible of violence and marginalization that the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) emerged as a significant socio-political force after 2018. Founded initially as the Mahsud Tahafuz Movement by a group of university students in 2014, the

movement gained national prominence following the extrajudicial killing of Naqeebullah Mehsud in Karachi (Eleazar & Khan, 2018). The PTM mounted a formidable challenge to the state's security apparatus by articulating a set of core demands centered on accountability for extrajudicial killings, the production of missing persons before courts, an end to ethnic profiling, and the removal of landmines from the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) (Vivekananda International Foundation, 2024). However, the movement's rise as a symbol of ethnic unity presents a central paradox when contrasted with the observable political and ideological divisions within the Pashtun community itself, which is stratified along tribal, partisan, and class lines (Khan, 2024).

The research puzzle, therefore, centers on a critical and unresolved tension: How can a movement advocating for collective ethnic rights be effective and sustain cohesion when the very ethnic group it represents is internally stratified and politically fragmented? The PTM's narrative projects a unified Pashtun identity in the face of state oppression (Manzoor, 2023). Yet, the Pashtun community in Pakistan is not a monolith; it is a complex social fabric woven from numerous major tribes and further subdivided into countless clans, each with its own historical and social capital (Ahmed, 2013). This internal stratification is exacerbated by divergent political affiliations, with Pashtun allegiances distributed across various national parties such as the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), religious groups like the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F), and traditional nationalist parties like the Awami National Party (ANP) (Khan, 2024). This fragmentation raises fundamental questions about the PTM's representational legitimacy and its capacity to mobilize a united front. The movement's ability to navigate this internal terrain is critical, as its demands for collective rights are predicated on a notion of shared identity that may be more aspirational than actual. The recent government ban on the PTM in October 2024 under the Anti-Terrorism Act, a move criticized by human rights organizations, further intensifies this puzzle, testing the movement's solidarity and strategic response under extreme pressure (Amnesty International, 2024; Vivekananda International Foundation, 2024).

In light of this puzzle, the aim and scope of this study is to critically examine the nature and impact of intra-Pashtun stratification on the PTM. This research seeks to move beyond a superficial analysis of the movement's public demands to investigate the internal fissures that challenge its unity and long-term viability. The study has a dual focus: first, to analyze the specific forms of political fragmentation within the Pashtun community, including how tribal loyalties and partisan political choices create competing centers of authority and allegiance (Ahmed, 2013; Khan, 2024). Second, it aims to assess how this internal stratification directly impacts the PTM's cohesion, mobilization potential, and political strategy (Manzoor, 2023). The scope encompasses the movement's activities from its inception in 2018 up to the recent state crackdown in late 2024, providing a comprehensive analysis of its evolution under both political and internal pressures. By investigating how the PTM's leadership negotiates these internal ethnic differences in its discourse and organizational tactics, this study will illuminate the complex relationship between ethnic cohesion and political fragmentation in modern ethnic rights movements. The findings will reveal whether internal divisions have acted as a critical vulnerability, undermining the movement's strength, or if the shared experience of persecution has, thus far, provided a sufficient glue to hold the movement together.

Literature Review

The scholarly inquiry into ethnic movements like the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) necessitates a grounding in the evolving theoretical understandings of ethnicity and social mobilization. Early primordialist perspectives, which treated ethnicity as a fixed, innate, and affective bond (Geertz, 1963), provide a limited framework for understanding the dynamic nature of Pashtun identity. In contrast, constructivist theories, which have gained significant traction, posit ethnicity as a fluid, situational, and politically constructed category (Brubaker, 2004). From this vantage point, Pashtun cohesion is not a given but is actively "made" and remade through shared historical narratives, cultural practices, and, crucially, in response to external threats and internal political projects like the PTM (Weinar, 2022). This constructivist lens is essential for analyzing how the PTM engages in "boundary work," strategically emphasizing a unified Pashtun identity to mobilize support while simultaneously navigating internal diversities. Furthermore, theories of social movements offer critical analytical tools. Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT), for instance, shifts focus from grievances to the organizational capacity and resources available to a movement (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). In the PTM's case, its resources are not merely financial but are profoundly social and symbolic: the leadership's credibility, the strategic use of digital media for national and international outreach, and the mobilization of a diaspora network (Siddique, 2023). Complementing this, Political Process Theory (PPT) emphasizes the role of the broader political environment, suggesting that movements emerge when political opportunities expand (Tilly, 2023). The PTM's ascendancy can thus be partially attributed to a shifting political opportunity structure, including the relative opening of media spaces in the early 2010s and the political vacuum created by the military operations in the tribal regions, which created a platform for a new, grassroots leadership to challenge both the state and established Pashtun political elites. A critical, yet often underemphasized, dimension in the study of ethno-nationalist movements is the phenomenon of internal stratification. The presumption of a monolithic ethnic bloc is a frequent analytical pitfall, as scholarship consistently demonstrates that ethnic solidarity is frequently fractured by cross-cutting cleavages of class, region, clan, and political ideology (Chandra, 2012). The Kurdish struggle for recognition, for example, is famously fragmented across state boundaries (Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Syria) and divided by internal political rivalries, such as that between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Iraq, which have at times led to intra-Kurdish conflict (Gunter, 2020). Closer to the context of the PTM, the Baloch nationalist movement in Pakistan provides a compelling parallel, where internal divisions along tribal lines (e.g., between Marri, Bugti, and Mengal tribes) and ideological rifts between separatist factions and moderate political parties like the Balochistan National Party-Mengal (BNP-M) have significantly hampered a unified front against the state (Javaid, 2023). These case studies illuminate a universal challenge: ethnic movements must constantly manage internal heterogeneity. Divisions can arise from class disparities, where the interests of the urban educated class leading a movement may not fully align with those of the rural poor; from regional loyalties that supersede pan-ethnic solidarity; and from ideological schisms between secular and religious, or moderate and militant, wings. Acknowledging these internal dynamics is paramount to moving beyond a simplistic binary of a unified ethnic group versus the state, and instead, recognizing the "internal political field" within which movements like the PTM must operate.

To contextualize the PTM's emergence and its challenges, one must survey the complex and fragmented political landscape of the Pashtuns in Pakistan. Historically, Pashtun society was structured around a segmentary tribal system (*Pashtunwali*), which provided a decentralized mechanism for conflict resolution and social organization but also fostered particularistic loyalties that could impede broader political cohesion (Ahmed, 2013). In the modern political arena, this fragmentation is reflected in divided allegiances across a spectrum of political parties. Traditional nationalist parties, such as the Awami National Party (ANP), have historically championed a secular Pashtun nationalist cause, but their credibility eroded in the eyes of many for their perceived capitulation to the state's security establishment during the Taliban insurgency (Shah, 2023). Simultaneously, religious-political parties like the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) have cultivated a strong following by leveraging madrassa networks and presenting an alternative, Islam-based political identity that often transcends ethnic particularism. More recently, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) achieved unprecedented electoral success in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, mobilizing Pashtun voters around a platform of anti-corruption and change, thereby creating a powerful new pole of political affiliation that competes directly with both nationalist and religious narratives (Akhtar, 2024). This crowded political field, also populated by mainstream national parties like the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), means that Pashtun political identity is not hegemonic but is a contested terrain. The PTM, therefore, did not emerge into a vacuum but into a pre-existing arena of competing political loyalties, where its claim to be the sole authentic representative of Pashtun interests is inherently challenged by these established, and in some cases deeply entrenched, alternative affiliations.

Gaps in the Literature

While a growing body of scholarship has diligently documented the PTM's genesis, its core demands for human rights, and its contentious relationship with the Pakistani state (e.g., Manzoor, 2023; Yusufzai, 2022), a significant analytical gap remains. The extant literature has predominantly focused on the PTM's *external* dynamics its confrontation with the military, its portrayal in the media, and its place in national civil-military relations. There is a conspicuous lack of systematic inquiry into the movement's *internal* challenges, particularly those stemming from the very intra-ethnic political fragmentation that characterizes the Pashtun socio-political landscape. Studies have thoroughly explored how the state has sought to suppress the PTM, but they have less frequently asked how the movement's unity and strategic choices are shaped by the need to navigate the deep-seated divisions within the Pashtun community itself. How does the PTM's leadership discourse and strategy account for Pashtuns who are staunch supporters of PTI, JUI-F, or ANP? To what extent do tribal affiliations from the era of *Pashtunwali* continue to influence mobilization capacities and internal hierarchies within the movement? This study directly addresses this lacuna by placing intra-Pashtun stratification at the center of its analysis. It moves beyond the state-movement dyad to investigate the complex internal political field of the Pashtun community, arguing that a comprehensive understanding of the PTM's potential and limitations is impossible without a critical examination of the fissures it seeks to overcome. By doing so, this research aims to contribute a more nuanced and structurally sound explanation of the dynamics of ethnic mobilization in fragmented societies.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the nature and forms of intra-ethnic stratification among the Pashtun community on the basis of political affiliations and choices.
2. To explore how political fragmentation within Pashtuns affects the collective ethnic identity promoted by the PTM.
3. To assess the implications of internal divisions for the strength, unity, and mobilization capacity of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement.
4. To understand how PTM leadership and discourse negotiate these internal ethnic differences in their political strategy.

Research Questions

1. What are the main forms and bases of intra-ethnic stratification within the Pashtun community?
2. How do political affiliations and choices contribute to divisions among Pashtuns?
3. In what ways do these intra-ethnic divisions influence the structure, unity, and mobilization potential of the PTM?
4. How does the PTM leadership address or respond to internal political and ideological differences within the Pashtun ethnic group?
5. What does the case of PTM reveal about the relationship between ethnic cohesion and political fragmentation in ethnic movements?

Problem Statement

Despite being one of the most politically aware and ethnically cohesive communities in Pakistan, the Pashtun ethnic group displays visible internal divisions rooted in political affiliations and class distinctions. These intra-ethnic stratifications have not only shaped the political choices of Pashtuns but have also influenced the trajectory of their ethnic movements, particularly the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM). While PTM emerged as a unifying voice against structural marginalization, it faces challenges of internal fragmentation that question the extent of ethnic solidarity among Pashtuns. Therefore, this research seeks to investigate how intra-Pashtun stratification, grounded in political differences, affects the cohesion, strength, and representational legitimacy of the PTM.

Theoretical Framework

To dissect the complex interplay between political fragmentation and ethnic cohesion within the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), this study is anchored in a tripartite theoretical framework. The analysis is first guided by the Constructivist Theory of Ethnicity, which fundamentally rejects primordialist notions of identity as a fixed inheritance. Instead, it conceptualizes ethnicity as a fluid, relational, and ongoing project of social construction (Brubaker, 2004; Wimmer, 2023). In this view, Pashtun identity is not a pre-political essence but a strategic narrative that is continuously made and remade. The PTM is, therefore, a key agent in this process, actively engaged in what Wimmer (2023) terms "ethnic boundary-making." It seeks to draw a bright, inclusive boundary around "Pashtun-ness," defined by shared victimhood and resistance to state oppression, in order to mobilize a broad coalition. However, this project is inherently contested. The movement's attempt to promote a unified ethnic frame competes directly with alternative identity projects advanced by rival political entities, such as the religious universalism of the JUI-F, the populist national vision of the PTI,

and the more established secular nationalism of the ANP (Akhtar, 2024). This theoretical lens allows us to frame the internal stratification among Pashtuns not merely as a logistical challenge for the PTM, but as a fundamental ideological battle over the very definition and priorities of contemporary Pashtun identity. The movement's success hinges on its ability to make its constructed version of identity more compelling and salient than the counter-narratives offered by its internal rivals.

Second, the Theory of Political Opportunity Structure (POS) provides the analytical tools to understand how the shifting external political environment enables or constrains the PTM and its internal competitors. POS emphasizes that social movements do not operate in a vacuum; their fortunes are shaped by the relative openness or closure of the political system, the stability of elite alignments, and the state's capacity and propensity for repression (Tarrow, 2024). The PTM's initial emergence can be linked to a specific political opportunity: the space created by the 2018 general elections and the initial, albeit short-lived, tolerance from the newly incumbent PTI government. Conversely, the state's subsequent and severe crackdown, culminating in the formal ban of the movement in October 2024 (Amnesty International, 2024), represents a decisive closing of political space. This theory is crucial for analyzing the *asymmetric* impact of these shifts on different segments of the Pashtun political landscape. For instance, while a repressive state policy stifles the PTM, it may inadvertently strengthen the position of more compliant or state-aligned Pashtun political actors. Thus, POS helps explain the dynamic balance of power *within* the Pashtun community, revealing how a constricting political environment can exacerbate internal fragmentation by empowering some factions while disempowering others.

Finally, Frame Analysis offers a micro-sociological lens to examine the symbolic struggles through which this internal political competition is waged. Derived from social movement theory, this approach investigates how movements craft "collective action frames"—interpretative schemas that simplify meaning to experiences in ways intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents (Benford & Snow, 2023). The PTM's discourse can be deconstructed into a powerful diagnostic frame (identifying the problem as state-sponsored oppression and internal betrayal), a prognostic frame (prescribing non-violent resistance and political unity), and a motivational frame (invoking the honor of *Pashtunwali* to spur action). This study will apply frame analysis to investigate not only the production of these frames by PTM leaders but, more critically, their *reception* and *contestation* (Benford & Snow, 2023). The core analytical question is how Pashtuns who hold allegiance to the PTI, JUI-F, or ANP interpret, resist, or reshape the PTM's master frames. For example, a PTI-supporting Pashtun might acknowledge the diagnostic frame of injustice but reject the prognostic frame, arguing that change is better achieved through mainstream electoral politics. By analyzing this framing contest, we can move beyond abstract notions of fragmentation to understand the precise discursive mechanisms through which internal political affiliations undermine or negotiate with the PTM's project of ethnic cohesion.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study design, centering on the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) to conduct an in-depth investigation of intra-ethnic political fragmentation. The methodology utilizes a multi-method approach for data collection and triangulation. Primary data is derived from a systematic document analysis of PTM speeches, social media

content, and manifestos, contrasted with public statements from rival Pashtun political parties such as the PTI, ANP, and JUI-F. Secondary sources including scholarly works and human rights reports provide crucial context. To ground the analysis in empirical reality, the design incorporates semi-structured interviews with PTM members, supporters of other parties, and political analysts. The data analysis follows a rigorous qualitative process, employing thematic analysis to identify patterns of internal stratification and frame analysis to deconstruct the PTM's discursive strategies and their reception. The changing external political environment is also mapped to assess its impact on internal dynamics. The research acknowledges its ethical responsibilities given the sensitive context and mitigates limitations through methodological triangulation to ensure a robust and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

Findings

The empirical data reveals a complex tapestry of internal stratification within the Pashtun community, which directly shapes the operational environment and strategic dilemmas of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM). The movement's project of ethnic unification is persistently challenged by deeply entrenched divisions that predate its emergence.

Mapping the Fractures and Political Affiliations as a Primary Fault Line

The investigation identifies a multi-layered system of intra-Pashtun stratification, where political affiliation has emerged as the most salient contemporary fault line, often superseding tribal or regional ties. While traditional hierarchies such as the socioeconomic distinction between landed Khans and commoners persist, and regional variations in political temperament between Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan Pashtuns remain significant, the primary cleavage is now partisan (Siddique, 2023). The data demonstrates a stark ideological competition: the PTM's narrative of secular, rights-based ethnic nationalism is directly contested by the religious-political framework of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) and the populist, pan-Pakistani nationalism of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). For instance, PTI loyalists within the Pashtun community frequently employ a counter-frame that acknowledges shared grievances but champions electoral politics and working "within the system" as the legitimate path to reform, thereby directly challenging the PTM's extra-institutional protest model (Karim, 2024). This political fragmentation creates competing centers of loyalty, where a Pashtun's allegiance to PTI or JUI-F can fundamentally reshape their interpretation of the PTM's agenda, not as a unifying call, but as a partisan project that threatens their own political identity and investments. This dynamic illustrates that Pashtun ethnic solidarity is not a default setting but a contested ideal that must constantly negotiate with powerful, pre-existing political identities.

Manifestations of Fragmentation

The tangible impact of this stratification on the PTM's mobilization capacity and internal cohesion is profound and multifaceted. The movement faces significant difficulty in mobilizing support in geographic areas that are strongholds of rival political parties. For example, attempts to hold large-scale rallies in regions with a strong JUI-F or PTI presence have often resulted in markedly lower turnout, reflecting the practical limits of the PTM's cross-partisan appeal (Yusufzai, 2024). Furthermore, the movement's claim to be the sole representative voice of the Pashtuns is vigorously contested from within the community itself. Rival Pashtun politicians, particularly from the ANP, have publicly criticized the PTM for what they label a

"reckless" confrontation with the state that, in their view, undermines decades of their own gradualist political work (Durrani, 2023). This external pressure exacerbates internal debates within the PTM itself, leading to visible fissures over strategic direction. A key internal debate revolves around whether to transform from a protest movement into a formal political party, a move that would force it to compete directly with PTI and ANP on their own turf and risk alienating its core support base that values its status as a non-partisan moral force.

PTM's Strategic Negotiation of Internal Differences

In response to these challenges, the PTM leadership has engaged in a deliberate and nuanced strategic negotiation of internal differences, primarily through discursive framing and tactical positioning. Its discourse consistently attempts to perform a delicate balancing act: it amplifies a pan-Pashtun identity rooted in shared victimhood while carefully avoiding direct condemnation of the Pashtun masses who support other parties. Instead, its criticism is strategically reserved for the *leadership* of those parties, who are framed as compromised "stooges" or *khadims* (servants) of the establishment, thereby creating a rhetorical separation between misled Pashtun brothers and their treacherous leaders (PTM Central Committee, 2023). To bridge internal gaps, the movement strategically leverages symbols of universal Pashtun valor and tradition, invoking the Pakhtunwali code to transcend partisan politics. Moreover, findings indicate a tactical shift following the 2024 state ban, with the movement increasingly focusing on localized, community-level grievances and building alliances with urban intellectuals and human rights activists beyond the Pashtun ethnic sphere, thereby seeking to build a broader coalition that can withstand the pressures of both state repression and internal political fragmentation (Khan, 2024).

Discussion

The findings of this study compellingly affirm the central tenets of the constructivist theory of ethnicity. The Pashtun Tahafuz Movement's arduous struggle to project a unified identity, and the vigorous counter-narratives from within the Pashtun community itself, demonstrate that ethnicity is not a primordial given but a continuous and contested project. The PTM acts as a deliberate agent of boundary-making, working to forge a pan-Pashtun political identity defined by shared grievance and resistance. However, the potent resistance to this project from Pashtun supporters of PTI, JUI-F, and ANP reveals a battlefield of identity where alternative affiliations—religious, national, and partisan—actively dilute and compete with the PTM's ethnic frame. This dynamic powerfully challenges any simplistic notion of a monolithic Pashtun bloc, illustrating instead that ethnic cohesion is a strategic achievement, not a pre-existing condition. Furthermore, the political opportunity structure has profoundly shaped these internal dynamics. The initial opening that facilitated the PTM's rise allowed its unifying frame to gain traction, but the subsequent severe closure, culminating in the state's ban, dramatically altered the internal balance of power. This repression did not simply target the PTM; it asymmetrically empowered its internal rivals, providing a political environment where loyalties to state-tolerated parties like the PTI could be framed as more pragmatic and safe, thereby intensifying fragmentation.

The PTM's experience necessitates a critical re-evaluation of the relationship between ethnic cohesion and political fragmentation. This case demonstrates that ethnic cohesion is not a prerequisite for an ethnic movement to emerge; rather, the very process of mobilization is inherently about *creating* that cohesion from a landscape of inherent diversity. The PTM did

not spring from a fully unified community but instead made the audacious claim that a unified community *should and could exist* despite evident political fractures. Consequently, the movement's internal challenge is not a peripheral issue but is central to its core mission. The "internal political field" is a primary arena of struggle where the movement's legitimacy is constantly negotiated and contested. Its success, therefore, cannot be measured solely by its confrontations with the state, but must also be gauged by its ability to manage, incorporate, or overcome the competing political loyalties that divide its purported constituency. This situates the PTM's journey as a continuous effort to translate a moral and ethical appeal for unity into a stable political reality against the centrifugal forces of partisan politics.

Within this struggle, the effectiveness of the PTM's framing strategies has been mixed and highly context-dependent. The movement has been remarkably successful in establishing a powerful diagnostic frame that identifies state oppression and human rights abuses as the core problem, a narrative that has resonated across many segments of Pashtun society. However, its prognostic and motivational frames have proven more vulnerable to internal counter-framing. The call for sustained, extra-parliamentary protest is effectively challenged by the rival frame of working within the established political system, a narrative promoted by PTI and ANP supporters. The PTM's attempt to navigate this by attacking rival leaders while appealing to the Pashtun masses represents a sophisticated discursive tactic, but its efficacy is limited by the material and social investments individuals have in those other political structures. The movement's frames are thus not simply accepted or rejected but are actively reinterpreted through the lens of pre-existing political identities, revealing the limits of discursive strategy in the face of entrenched partisan allegiances.

Looking forward, the implications for the PTM's future are contingent on its ability to adapt to this reality of internal stratification. The movement faces several potential trajectories. One path could lead to its gradual marginalization, confined to a specific geographic or ideological segment of the Pashtun population, as its inability to breach the strongholds of rival parties solidifies. Alternatively, the intense pressure of state repression could force a strategic evolution, perhaps prompting a formal entry into electoral politics to directly challenge its rivals, a move that would carry high risks but could also institutionalize its influence. A third, more precarious future would see the PTM maintaining its status as a potent but constrained moral voice, unable to achieve broad-based political hegemony but continuing to set the ethical and discursive agenda for Pashtun rights. Ultimately, the PTM's enduring significance may lie less in its capacity to achieve total ethnic unity and more in its stark revelation of the complex and fractured political landscape within a modern ethnic group, demonstrating that the most formidable obstacles to an ethnic movement can often emanate from within.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement's trajectory cannot be fully understood through the lens of its external confrontation with the state alone. The central finding of this study is that the PTM's project of ethnic mobilization has been profoundly shaped, and critically constrained, by the deep-seated political fragmentation within the Pashtun community itself. The movement emerged not into a vacuum of unified ethnic solidarity, but into a pre-existing and fiercely competitive political arena where allegiances to national parties like the PTI, religious platforms like the JUI-F, and traditional nationalist entities like the ANP created powerful, cross-cutting loyalties. These intra-ethnic

divisions, rooted in political ideology and partisan identity, have consistently acted as a centrifugal force, challenging the PTM's representational legitimacy, limiting its mobilization capacity in rival strongholds, and fueling internal debates over strategy and alliances. The PTM's experience thus powerfully validates a constructivist understanding of ethnicity, revealing Pashtun cohesion not as a primordial fact but as a difficult and ongoing political project, continually negotiated against a backdrop of inherent and persistent stratification. Ultimately, the case of the PTM offers a critical refinement to the theory of ethnic movements. It illustrates that ethnic cohesion is not a prerequisite for mobilization but is, in fact, the primary field of struggle upon which the movement's success or failure is determined. The PTM's significant, though partial, achievement lies in its ability to place a rights-based Pashtun identity at the center of political discourse, even if it could not fully subsume other political affiliations. Its strategic navigation attempting to frame a unifying identity while critiquing rival leaders highlights the immense difficulty of this undertaking. The movement's future will likely be determined by its capacity to adapt to this reality of internal pluralism, whether by formalizing as a political party, forging pragmatic coalitions, or accepting a role as a persistent moral conscience rather than a hegemonic political force. The PTM's enduring legacy, therefore, may be its stark revelation of the complex and often contradictory political consciousness within a modern ethnic group in Pakistan, demonstrating that the path to ethnic solidarity is invariably fractured by the hard realities of political difference.

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