

Inherited Loyalties, Biradaris, and Cultural Politics in Mianwali: An Analysis

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Abstract

This paper critically reviews how inherited loyalties and structures of biradarism and cultural practices persisted in influencing the political behavior in Mianwali. It claims that even though democratic processes have grown and ideological political movements have emerged, traditional affinities, based on kinship, social hierarchies and tribal affiliations, are still ingrained in the political and social landscape of the district. The study investigates the intertwined nature of how biradari networks still shape the preferences of voters, electoral mobilization and local governance to prove that party affiliation or political ideology is not the only determinant of political activity in the district. The socio-historical and analytical approach the study uses places Mianwali in the larger context of identity politics in Pakistan with the particular focus on the long-term relevance of the localized social structures in determining political consequences. Using some historical examples of political mobilization in the region, it sheds light on the way; long-term kinship relations, social expectations, and inherited loyalties interact with the modern elections and form a hybrid system, uniting traditional authority with the modern mechanisms of political interaction. The results indicate that in Mianwali political modernization has not led to the replacement of these traditional structures, but rather resulted in their adjustment, where the biradari networks have been able to strategically consider political parties and institutional structures to ensure that they remain influential. This broadened conceptualization of local politics highlights the importance of considering socio-cultural ideas when studying electoral behavior, governance and development of democratic practices in semi-urban and rural districts in Pakistan. The study helps to understand how traditional political structures still stand in the changing democratic environments by showing how historical social hierarchies still influence modern political environments in a very subtle manner.

Keywords: Biradari, Political Movements, Identity Politics, Political Mobilization, Political Modernization

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Introduction

This has been the issue of politics in Pakistan since its independence as formal democratic institutions interact with informal socio-cultural systems.¹ As much as the varying constitutional structures are based on the principles of electoral representation, party competitions and procedural democracy; the realities of political participation are usually moderated by the entrenched social institutions. Of these, the strength of biradari networks², ties of kinship, and inheritance loyalties is particularly significant, especially in the rural and semi-urban districts. These environments often shape political participation and voting patterns based upon cultural beliefs, established hierarchies, and established social and societal duties, and often disregard pre-existing political party agendas or government initiatives. This poor dichotomy between formal institutions and informal social practices forms a complicated political landscape that cannot be reduced to simple explanations.³

A very informative context in which to study these interactions is Mianwali, which is located in the northwestern part of Punjab.⁴ Social-political environment in the district is marked by long-standing tribal affiliations, historical conservation of elite rule, and uneven, albeit slow, political laziness. Access to political power has historically been organized by landownership patterns, social stratification, and longstanding affiliations between families which enforce a disproportionate political power in the hands of a few families and biradaris over local matters.⁵ Since independence, Pakistan witnessed very crucial political changes, including martial law, democratic revival⁶, and emergence of new political parties like Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Nationally transformative but experiencing interactions that complicated the national trends, these macro-level shifts related to some districts in the Punjab some complex ways, resulting in localized outputs, which more frequently led to non-national trends.⁷

This paper aims to examine how loyalties inherited, biradari affiliations, and domestic culture practices have influenced political behavior in this political turmoil of Mianwali. Placing these dynamics into a conceptual framework of identity politics, the study makes it apparent that social identity, collective memory and the cultural norm are important determinants of political decisions. The history of the political mobilization of Bengalis in East Pakistan⁸ shows that grievances based on identity, when combined with structural exclusion, can have significant implications on political mobilization and electoral success.⁹ The enduring nature of identity-based political alignment in Mianwali shows the importance of socio-cultural factors in interpreting political behavior.

The comprehension of the nexus of formal democratic processes and informal social networks in a district such as Mianwali offers the necessary information on the macro issues on democratic consolidation in Pakistan.¹⁰ It highlights the fact that one cannot grasp the electoral politics in terms of the legal and procedural framework only, but rather the appreciation of kinship; culture and past power relations would be essential in the understanding of continuity and change in the local political life.¹¹ Through these interactions, this paper has enhanced a more inquisitive insight about how local social and cultural realities influence the political situation in the changing Pakistani democratic scene.¹²



Prominent Biradari Structures in the Mianwali District: Spatial Patterns and Political Domains

Mianwali has a strong socio-political organization based on the role of its biradaris, which continues to affect political behavior and organization based on kinship relationships that are rooted in the dominance of their historical biradaris.¹³ Although the broader concept of biradarism can be used to explain why kinship networks persist, the practical operation of politics in the district is best explained through the interaction of major groups like the Niazi, Awan, Bhachar, Billuch Pathan and Khattak which organize the structure of electoral forms and local power relations.¹⁴ Through land ownership, tribal unification and co-operation with colonial and post-colonial state systems, the historically these biradaris centralized their power. Such legacy meant that the concentration of political power to a few and powerful families guaranteed that the electoral politics became an instrument of continuation and not redistribution of political power.¹⁵ The Niazi biradari was the most powerful political party in Mianwali.¹⁶ Its good internal integration and leadership connections facilitated successful voter mobilization, especially between 2002 and 2018.¹⁷ Emergence of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) did not undermine the traditional structures but it is solidified by the fusion of Niazi networks, which reflects how the biradari loyalties are being enhanced by new political platforms, rather than substituting them. Awan biradari, (mostly Nawabs of Kalabagh), having a strong agrarian foundation has also been influential especially in rural constituency.¹⁸ They have remained active in the changing political realities by being flexible to vote with various parties over the years unlike the relatively smooth Niazi bloc, thus sustaining their presence in the existing political landscape.¹⁹ This flexibility emphasizes the political strategy of biradari politics in brokering power in institutionalized organizations. Locally strong yet smaller segments like the Bhachar biradari of Wan Bhachran have played a role in micro electoral outcomes. Their close-knit networks allow them to establish good control over certain constituencies, which strengthens the value of localized kinships in the formation of political competition.²⁰ In the same vein, Billuch Pathans of Piplan work via tribal leadership and collective decision-making with often politics being determined by communal views and not by personal inclination.²¹ The Khattak biradari (people who settled the Khattak Belt on the other side of the Indus River) is less dominant, but engages in larger groups, the hierarchical and interdependent nature of the biradari politics.²²

The results of elections in the 2002-2018 indicate that the growth of democratic procedures did not reduce the power of these biradaris.²³ Between 2002 when the elite continued to control the area and 2013 when PTI emerged and established itself in 2018, the politically driven change in Mianwali was rooted in the already existing social setups. Instead of eliminating the old systems, the party politics coexisted with them giving rise to a new kind of political order as a hybrid.²⁴ In addition to elections, these biradaris also shape how resources are allocated, dispute resolution as well as local governance entrenching their power into formal and informal institutions.²⁵ The fact that they dominated over time is an indication that the political modernization process in Mianwali did not



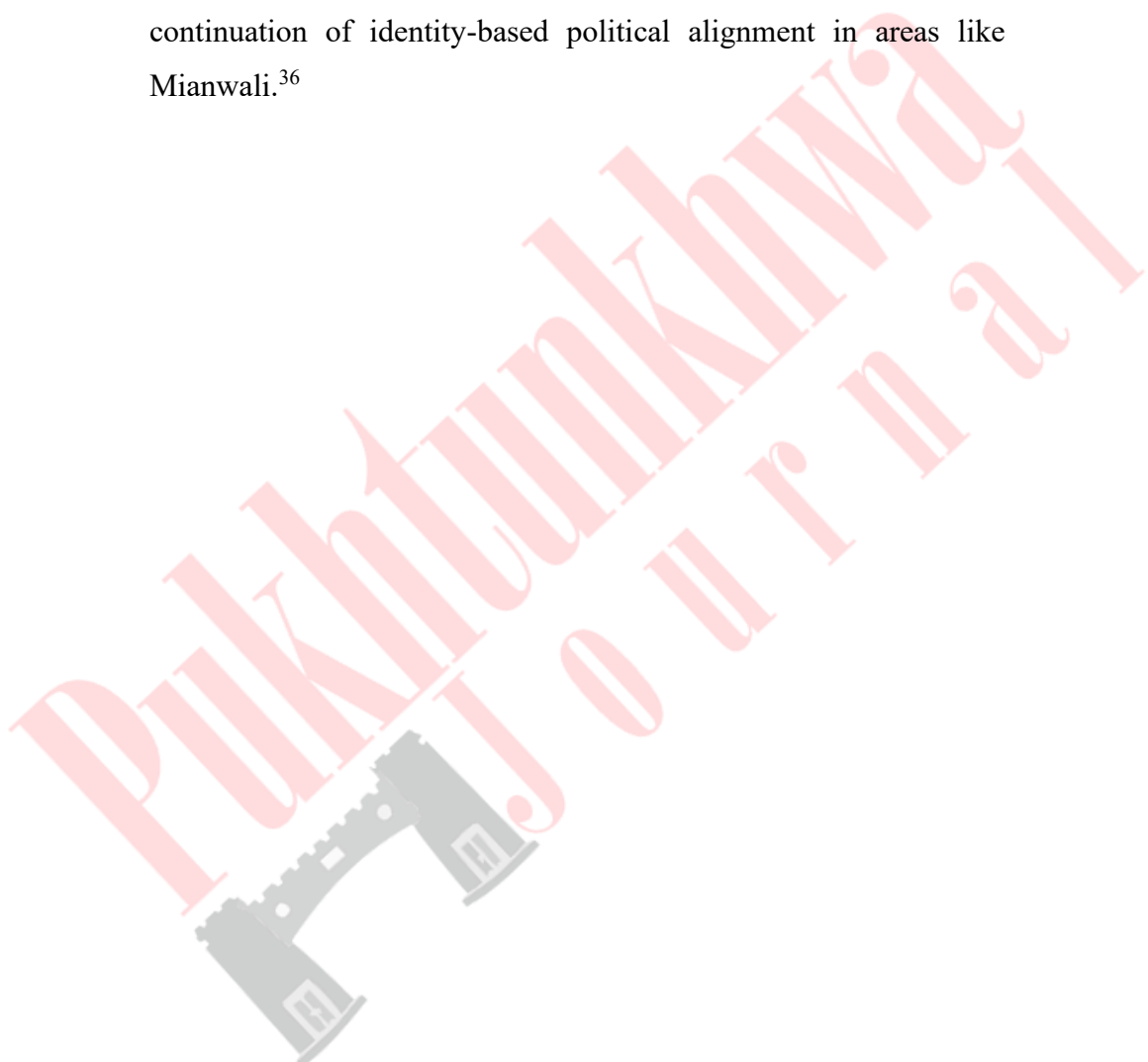
weaken the traditional power structures in the area but by law incorporated them as part of the modern democratic processes.²⁶ In turn, the place of prominent biradaris is the key to perceiving continuity in addition to change in the socio-political evolution of the district.²⁷

1. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual base of this research is grounded on the intermeeting of the field of political sociology and anthropological views, especially on the areas that discuss kinship, social order, and identity. When examining political behavior, like in such a case as Mianwali, the context needs to be placed back within the framework of social and cultural structures that underlie both individual and group decisions.²⁸ In this aspect, inherited loyalties are an essential category of analysis. These loyalties are the passing of political preferences, affiliations and duties across the family, kinship and even communal networks.²⁹ Notably, inherited loyalties do not solely exist in symbolic form, and perpetuated by traditional forms of social arrangement, rite, and duty, inherited loyalties entrench and codify a system of continuity through which political identities are reproduced and enacted.³⁰ One of the characteristic structures of the social and political life of the Punjabi society is represented by the biradari system which organizes local life in far-reaching lines.³¹ Biradaris can be used in politics as a way of mobilizing people as a unit, negotiating power, and influencing election results in formal democracies in terms of access to resources, which in anthropological literature has indicated the centrality of the concept of kinship networks in organizing social hierarchies, managing power distribution, and determining electoral results.³² By so doing, they end up establishing a political atmosphere in which the allegiance at the group level always eclipses the political aspect.

These structures are strengthened also with cultural norms and values that entrenched political behavior into a larger moral and social order. The ideas of honor (izzat), loyalty, reputation, and collective decision-making are closely intertwined with biradari-founded political behavior, and they serve as mechanisms of social control, which establish the expectations of how a political behavior should act and dishearten the adherence deviations out of a group.³³ As a result, the choices concerning politics are hardly individualistic; they are often mediated based on the social duties and cultural demands.³⁴ It is the power of these norms that will be able to see that political legitimacy will be not only provided by the

formal election numbers but by the obedience to the practices and values approved by a community.³⁵ Practically, biradari and hereditary loyalties result in a social world whereby the chances of going against the established political preferences is curtailed, and personal liberty of making political decisions is curtailed by the influence of social demands.³⁶ This conceptual frame incorporating the ideas of political sociology and anthropology gives a powerful perspective through which political behavior could be studied using the principles of socio-cultural structures. It highlights how both inherited loyalties and the normative basis of the biradari systems are important to the reasoning behind electoral politics and continuation of identity-based political alignment in areas like Mianwali.³⁶



2. Historical Evolution of Political Structures in Mianwali

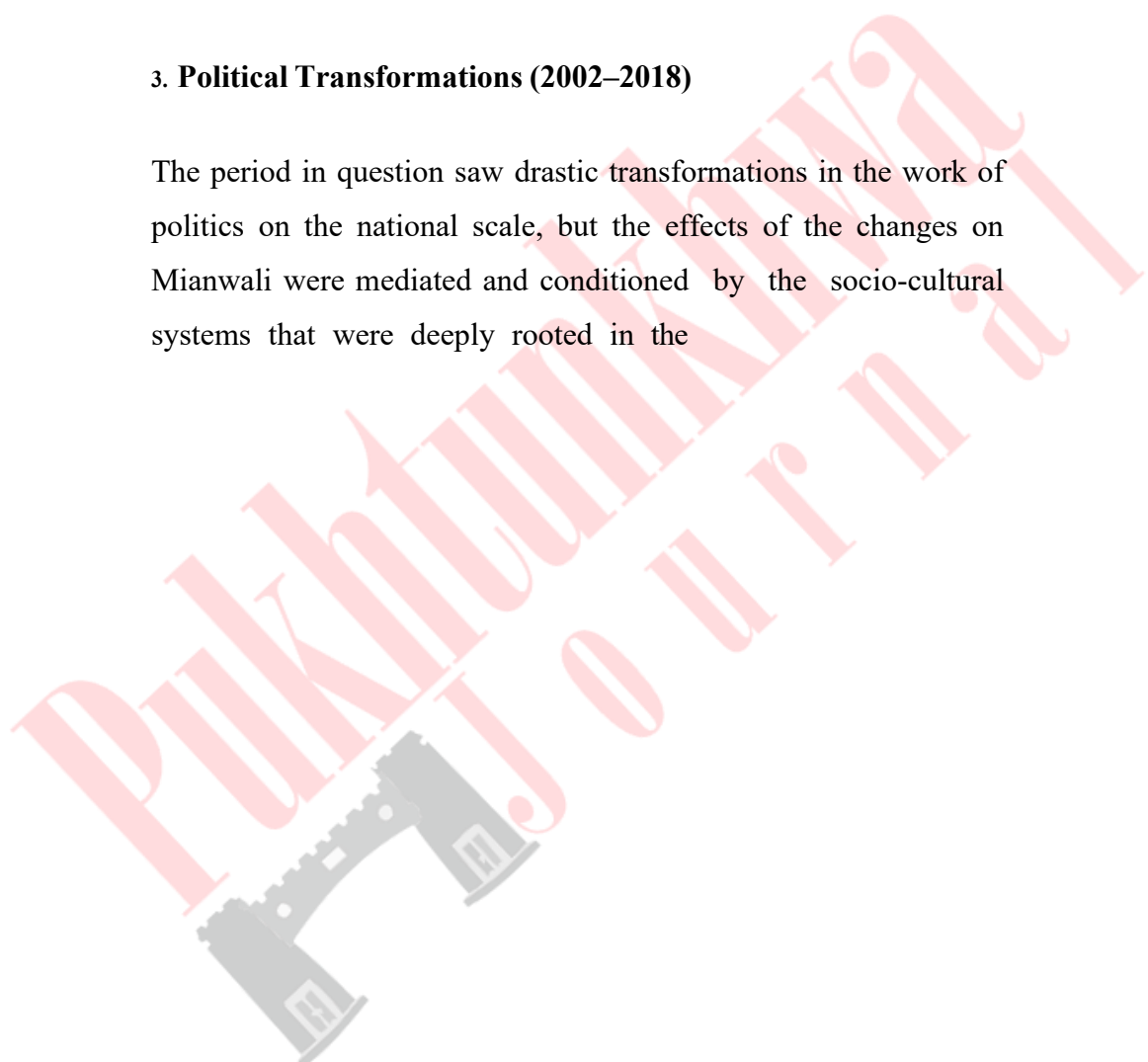
The tribal structure of Mianwali is closely interwoven with the political history of the district, the land ownership structures, as well as the socio-cultural hierarchies that historically characterized the district.³⁷ These powerful biradaris, especially the Niazi and Awana clans, have dictated the balance of political power and the local political landscape with their economies of scale, social status, and a set of well-nurtured alliances, which has allowed them to take considerable influence on the local politics and election results.³⁸ The ownership of land, especially that of land, has been a big tool of power, not just economical but social as well since being a large-estate owner has traditionally been associated with both leadership and control of making decisions within the society.³⁹

Under the colonial regime, these hierarchies were further strengthened when the British government enlisted local elite into its hierarchical structure of indirect rule, which was charged with the responsibility of collecting revenue, enforcing law and order and creating social support on the colonial policies.⁴⁰ This elite power supplemented by the institutionalization of elite authority succeeded in creating an effective manner of socio-political dominance of some biradaris such that despite the development of political power transference, it would be maintained in the hands of a select group.⁴¹ The systems of indirect rule did not only legitimize the power of tribal and landed elites, but had also sustained a system of governance where social hierarchy and relationships defined political access of resources.⁴² With independence in 1947, these established structures were passed on to the post-colonial state, and political power in Mianwali would be strongly held by a few elites. Electoral politics represented less of a means of extensive representation and more of a reproduction method of the existing systems of power.⁴³ Biradari networks were often involved in local elections, party affiliations, and political appointments, and loyalty and communal affiliations often outweighed ideological or programmatic factors. Towards the end of the twentieth century, the incorporation of Mianwali in the national political activities brought new dynamics of politics, such as the increased competition between the parties, the formalization of electoral politics and increased processes of political mobilization.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, in spite of these institutional developments, the socio-political fabric stood and

continued to stand in a singularly tenacious manner. The media of political control were still biradari in nature and local elites still managed to shape the outcome, mobilize voters and bargain power using the formal organizational forms of the parties.⁴⁵ In this way, the history of political organization in Mianwali can be thought of as representing a form of continuity in elite domination in which formal institutionalizations of democracy are at work with the social impregnation of hierarchies. These trends have left behind a series of events, but this does not diminish the value of addressing them both as historical legacy and current socio-cultural influences in the study of political behavior in the district.⁴⁶

3. Political Transformations (2002–2018)

The period in question saw drastic transformations in the work of politics on the national scale, but the effects of the changes on Mianwali were mediated and conditioned by the socio-cultural systems that were deeply rooted in the



particular area.⁴⁷ The 2002 general elections, which were conducted during the military rule of General Pervez Musharraf, were symbolic of this combination of official political reform and established pyramids of power.⁴⁸ Although these elections witnessed new forms of political actors and operations, including the focus on the competition of parties and reserved seats, the reality of the electoral results in Mianwali served more as a continuation of the long-established political trends in the area: the influence of biradari affiliations, loyalty towards kinsmen, and established elites.⁴⁹ The political power was still tightly intertwined with social status, land and family connections, which guaranteed the ability of traditional power brokers to influence the election results.⁵⁰

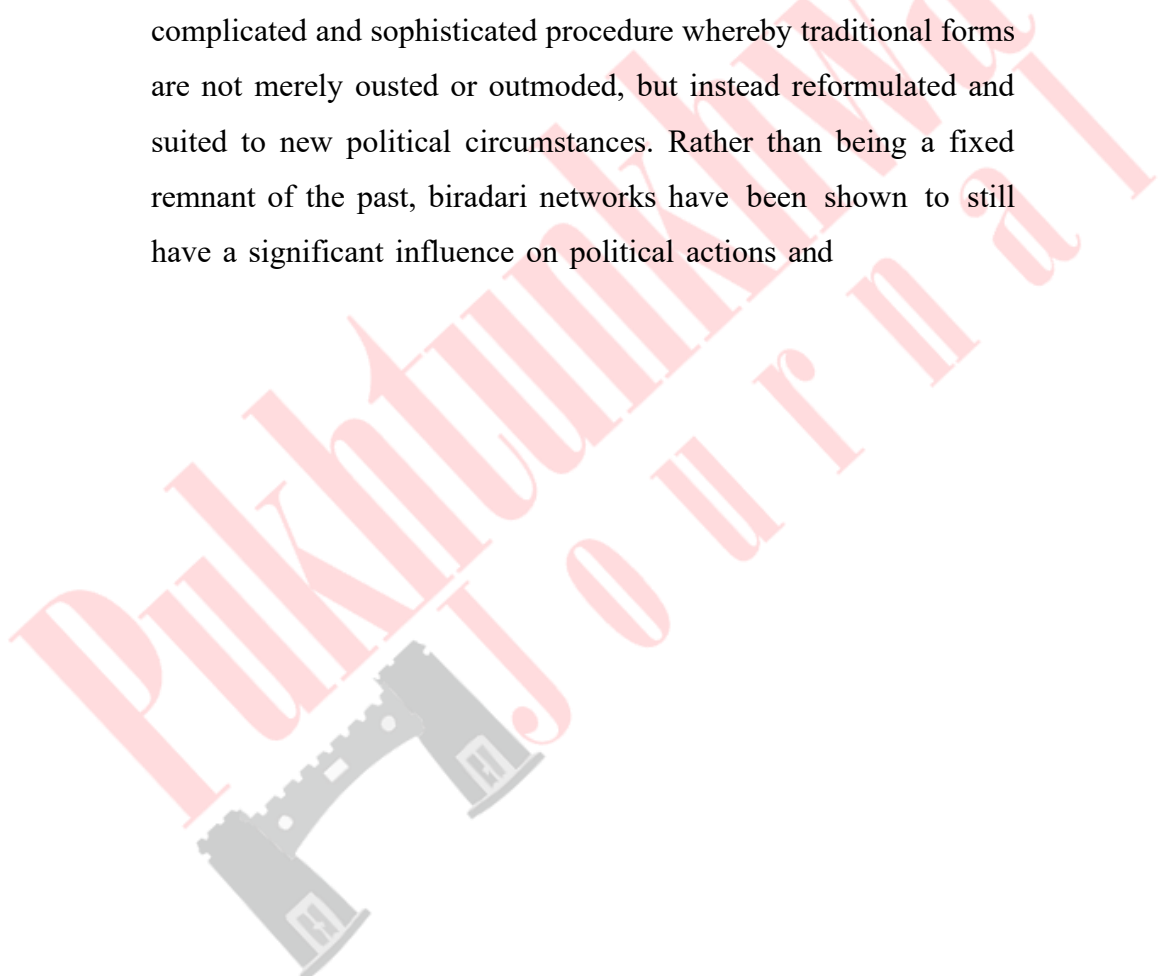
In 2008 with the transition to civilian rule, multi-party democracy and greater political competition was emphasized. The most significant national parties such as the Pakistan Muslim league-nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan people party (PPP) looked to expand their tentacles in Mianwali by investing in campaigns and voter mobilization plans. Nevertheless, these changes in institutions did not ensure that party affiliation was not inferior to kinship and communal factors.⁵¹ Preserving the relevance of these social organizational structures, candidates still heavily depended on biradari networks to consolidate their support, which proved that political decisions were often based on the loyalty to relations with their families, clans, or influential people in the region undermining the importance of the democratic process.⁵²

With the formation of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), a relative newcomer in the political arena, there was a new twist to the politics in Mianwali in 2013.⁵⁴ The rhetoric of reform, accountability, anti-corruption, and empowerment of youth used by PTI appealed to the voters in certain segments, especially among the younger voters who felt a need to have an alternative to traditional elites.⁵⁵ The coordination of major biradaris and powerful domestic players behind PTI was a crucial factor in solidifying its support, and this is how old social structures have been modified to support new political practices and social orders.⁵⁶ By 2018 general elections, Mianwali had successfully evolved into a hybrid political system, in which the forces of tradition and modernity worked simultaneously.⁵⁷ Party politics did not replace the use of Biradari networks instead it played a role in influencing the development of the campaigns where a candidate and party could both adapt to the formal institutional demands and constraints as well as the informal

socio-cultural demands of voting.⁵⁸ The district therefore represents a political conditioning of historical structures of commitment and local power linking up with the demands of modern participatory democracy, forming a multifaceted and responsive paradigm of local jurisdiction.⁵⁹

4. Analytical Discussion

The ongoing viability of biradari politics in Mianwali highlight the natural constraints of traditional images of political modernization which tends to assume that it will inevitably lead to the ultimate of formal institutions being adopted, accompanied by the eventual displacement of deeply rooted social structural constraints.⁶⁰ The example of Mianwali, nevertheless, depicts a much more complicated and sophisticated procedure whereby traditional forms are not merely ousted or outmoded, but instead reformulated and suited to new political circumstances. Rather than being a fixed remnant of the past, biradari networks have been shown to still have a significant influence on political actions and



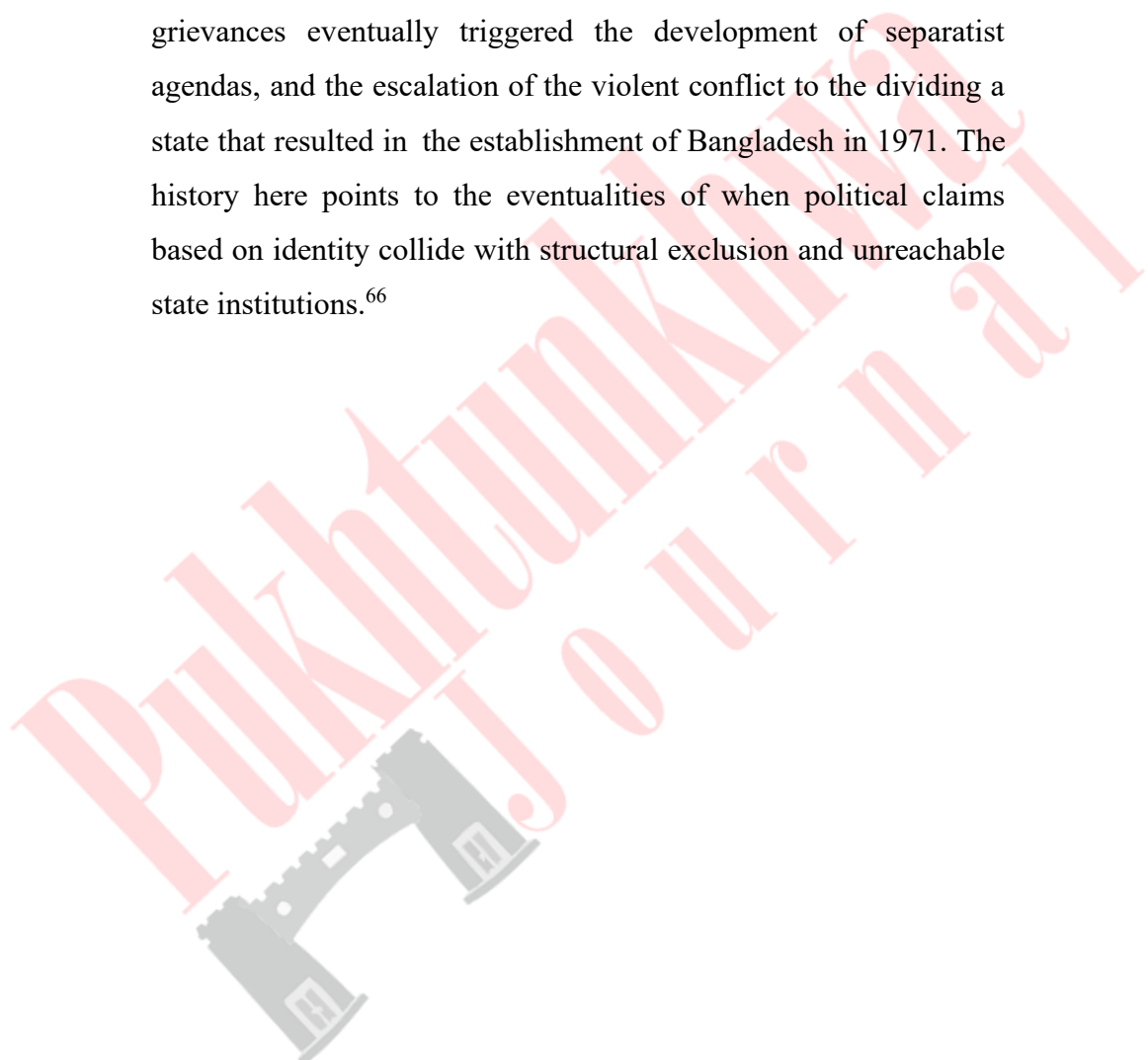
deliver a lasting pattern of action of collective decision-making, electoral mobilization, and bargaining of power in the local and national political sphere.⁶¹ Loyalties that are inherited are a key element in sustaining this perennial influence¹⁸. Socialization forms of trans-generational conveying of political preferences, affiliations, and obligations emphasize continuity, conformity and communal responsibility, which fit individuals with anticipations of conformity to established leadership and group interests. These allegiances are strengthened by rituals, social mandate and day-to-day affairs with the result that a sense of moral and social obligation is formed almost overriding the wish of the individual to vote. Essentially, biradari systems are informal institutions that channel political participation, although formal electoral and party systems may exist.⁶²

Meanwhile, the political landscape of Mianwali is undergoing more socio-political changes bringing new variables. The growth of education and the access to more and more information via digital and traditional media, as well as exposure to alternative political narratives has empowered individuals, especially those in younger generations, to be more and more involved with politics in a manner that was once limited by the local social hierarchies.⁶³ Such changes are easier to promote awareness about national concerns, policy arguments, and ideological agendas, and it allows people to challenge or handle the scope of hereditary political allegiances. Continuity and change therefore dominate in the resulting political culture in Mianwali in a dynamic manner. Older systems like biradari networks are still very strong and impact the alliances, voting patterns and political tactics. At the same time, these institutions are progressively becoming engaged with the contemporary modes of political participation, such as partied competition, issue-focused campaigns and social media activism.⁶⁴ The result is an integrative model of government and involvement that combines the continuity of the socio-cultural power as well as the flexibility of importing the present political activities, which forms a remarkable example of how modernity and tradition co-exist and co-evolve in local politics.

5. Comparative Perspective

The politics of the Mianwali situation can be effectively placed

within a more general comparative context of identity politics in other districts of the Punjab and provide insights into the degree to which a social, cultural, and kinship identity influences political behavior under varying regional locations.⁶⁵ An example of this is the situation of Bengali separatism in the former East Pakistan which is given as instructive. In this case, the political circumstances that predisposed radical political mobilizations were the combination of cultural identity with systematic political, economic, and administrative marginalization of the Bengali people, the unaddressed grievances of the Bengali population as they applied to language, economic inequity, and political voice.²⁶ These unsettled grievances eventually triggered the development of separatist agendas, and the escalation of the violent conflict to the dividing a state that resulted in the establishment of Bangladesh in 1971. The history here points to the eventualities of when political claims based on identity collide with structural exclusion and unreachable state institutions.⁶⁶

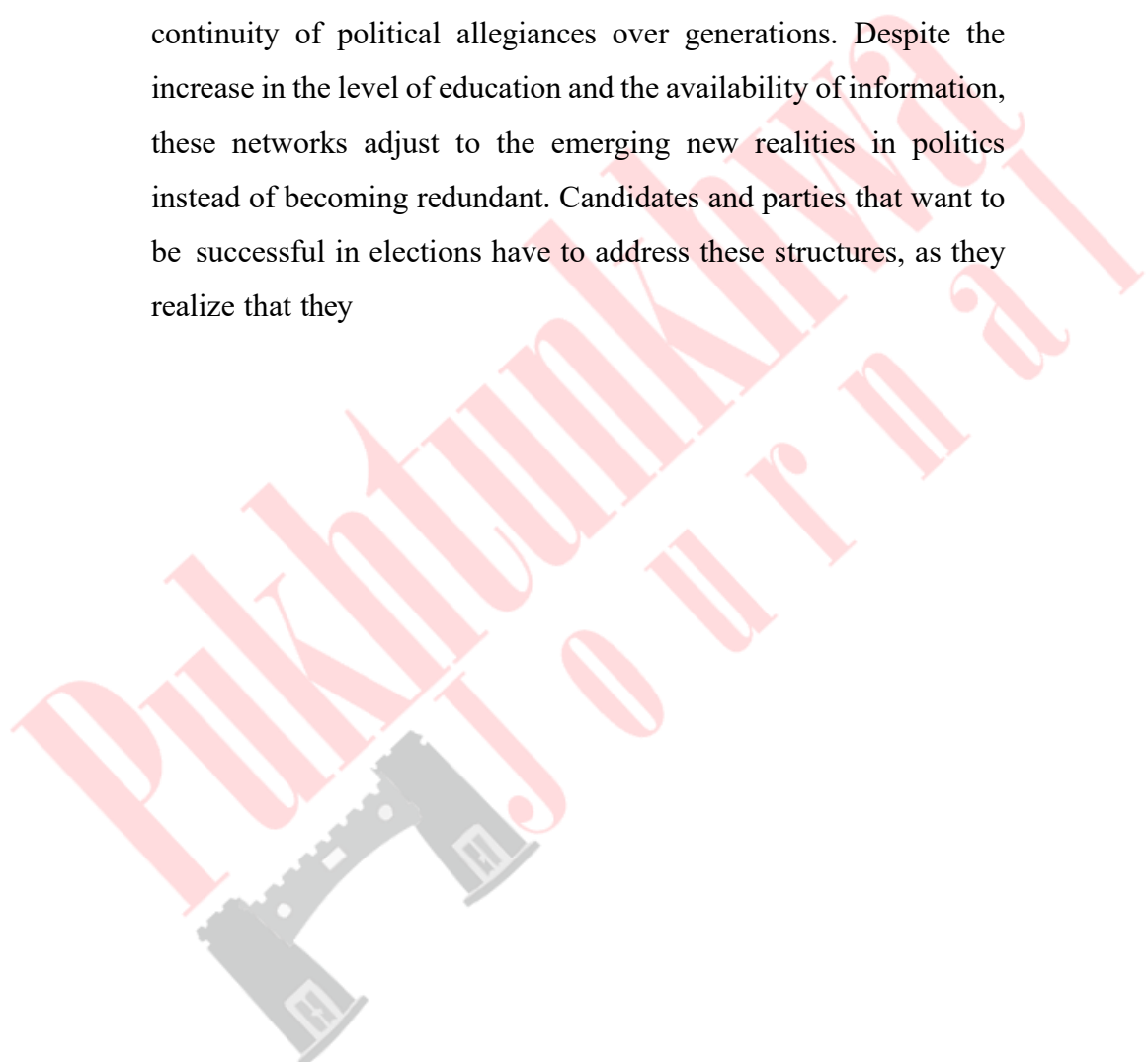


Conversely, the politics of Mianwali, although driven by the same principal as influenced by identity factors, play within an entirely different framework of limitations and possibilities.⁶⁷ In this case, the major groups by which identity determines political behavior groups are the biradari affiliations, tribal ties, and inherited political networks. They facilitate mass mobilization, bargaining of power, and fit with the formal political structures, but in a manner that does not question territorial or constitutional integrity of the state. Identity acts as a vehicle of gaining power, rallying voters behind it, and brokering communities and parties at the local level, and not a triggers separatist feeling.⁶⁸ This analogy supports the significance of context in determining the direction and form of identity-based politics. Though both Mianwali and East Pakistan demonstrate the mobilizing power of identity, the consequences vary because of the differences in historical experience, responsiveness in the state, and structural embeddedness of social networks. The existence of biradari networks in the electoral aspects of Mianwali coupled with the establishment of functioning state institutions and a place to be involved in politics have provided opportunities to operate identity based alignments to work positively in the already existing political scenario.⁶⁹ The outcome is a localized identity politics which bargains on power and influence instead of questioning the larger politics. It is important to understand Mianwali in this comparative light as considering the subtle aspects in which identity is engaged in political structures. It shows that identity-based politics is not necessarily destabilizing and radical, but its impacts are determined by the socio-political setting in general, the circumstances of history in general, and the institutions in the general. Through the place of the political proceedings in the district, and the other regional histories, such as Bengali separatism scholars will be better placed to realize the conditional and context-specificity of identity-oriented political action in Pakistan.⁷⁰

6. Conclusion

The discussion of political practice in Mianwali that took place between 2002 and 2018 reveals the timeless value of inherited loyalties, biradari groups, and poorly ingrained cultural values in the determination of local politics. Although major level political changes have occurred at the national level, such as the advent of modern political forces, democratization efforts, and a rise in party

competition, these traditional social models have continued playing an influential role in shaping the electoral process, candidate selection and general political mobilization trends. Their presence underscores the singularity of traditional formulations of political modernization in which it is generally presumed that the growth of formal institutionalized forms of democracy automatically reduces the power of kinship, tribal affiliation or hereditary social stratification. Biradari networks are still important in the collective coordination, socialization, and political bargaining. They offer a lasting structure by which people make their electoral decisions in line with their families and communities, and which enables continuity of political allegiances over generations. Despite the increase in the level of education and the availability of information, these networks adjust to the emerging new realities in politics instead of becoming redundant. Candidates and parties that want to be successful in elections have to address these structures, as they realize that they



are capable of organizing significant masses and can serve as the mediator of relations between the local community and the institutions of the state.

The era of interest exemplifies the development of the hybrid political regime in Mianwali, where the traditional and modern factors coexist and interact with each other. Instead of being overtaken by the newer political forces in the region like the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and other national parties, the biradari networks have been very dynamic in that they have been able to introduce party politics, formalized electoral processes to the established social-cultural structures. The result of this hybridization is a political terrain where both historic continuity and new modern change can at once be seen: the traditional adhesiveness and decision-making by community alongside the issue-driven campaigns, ideological appeals, and formalized democracy. The results of Mianwali have greater implications of local politics in Pakistan. According to them, the informal social structures, such as kinship ties and norms constructed within a particular culture, still assume a crucial role in defining the democratic participation, political orientation, and electoral success. Policy makers and academics must thus understand that the idea of empowering the institutions of democracy or promoting political reform can never be based on schemes alone; they have to also work with the socio-cultural realities that dictate politics. In this case Mianwali is some interesting case study of how in the case of local political cultures, localities can mediate the contact between traditional and modernist orientations and provide some time-honored lessons of how tradition and modernist can be negotiated within the governance, democratization and political development landscape in any country of Pakistan.

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International Journal of Pukhtunkhwa

Volume 11 | Issue I | Jan – June 2026

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