



Pashtun Millennials' Political Participation through Civic Engagement in Balochistan, Pakistan¹

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Introduction

Voluntary civic engagement, *ashar* in Pashto, has been an integral element of Pashtunwali for as far back as history exists in both oral and documented forms. *Pashtunwali*² is the customary code of conduct for Pashtuns encompassing principles like hospitality, honor, charity, council of elders, etc., and is essential to understanding the Pashtun regions and their complexities (Khan et al. 2019; Rzehak 2011).

In the rural Pashtun regions of Balochistan, Pakistan, the role of educated young men in fostering civic engagement is a crucial factor in shaping the trajectory of community development. Educated young men, particularly within the domains of neighborhoods, villages, tehsils, and districts, take on civic activities with determination to bridge the gap between the promise of the state to provide basic facilities and the factual absence of these services and infrastructure. To counter this lack of provisions by the state, civic activities are either initiated by individuals or more often by groups of young men voluntarily forming committees and *anjumans* (youth-led organizations focusing on the social welfare of the people) with the aspiration to uplift community well-being through community sensitisation, mobilisation and organisation. Along with an improvement in the delivery of civic services like functional educational and health facilities, access to clean drinking water, better



sanitation, entertainment venues and avenues, etc., the young men directly or indirectly engage in political discussions among themselves and also spread awareness among community members about their rights and duties towards the state. By disseminating awareness of citizens' rights and responsibilities, these young men empower their communities and engage in dialogues with administrative and political representatives, increasing political participation in the process. Therefore, this paper looks into the role of educated male Pashtun millennials in strengthening political participation through civic engagement in the rural Pashtun areas of Balochistan, Pakistan. To contextualise young men's initiatives in Balochistan, I start with a few examples from international and regional youth activism that seek to bring change. Next, the paper describes the study context. It looks into who Pashtun millennials are and discusses how the key concepts of this paper are defined in the literature. These definitions are then contrasted with the perceptions of the interview respondents. Finally, the paper presents emerging themes from this research, which is a small part of my doctoral research.

The use of "young men", instead of youth, in this paper is intentional as a significant limitation of this study lies in the fact that the participation of women was beyond the scope of my research. In the rural Pashtun region of Balochistan, men primarily dominate community affairs, with no opportunities for women to engage in committees, anjumans, or *jirga* (mediation) gatherings. While some women work with mainstream NGOs, their numbers are limited, and they rarely hold key positions. Cultural constraints, including patriarchal traditions and specific religious interpretations, restrict women from having a voice and influence in public matters.

Youth to the rescue

In this section, I present several examples of how collective grassroots initiatives can result in beneficial transformation. Discussing youth and/or community-led efforts around the world can help in understanding how educated young people engage in civic activities and how this influences their political participation in rural Balochistan, Pakistan. These modern stories align with the long-standing tradition of communities working together to achieve common goals. By uncovering the complex relationship between civic empowerment and political discussions, these stories provide a strong foundation for the analysis that follows.



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The UN World Youth Report on Youth Civic Engagement (2016) uses the words 'disappointed, disheartened, and vexed' to describe the sentiment young individuals have regarding their governments' failure to effectively implement policies that support their transition from youth to adulthood. Young people took these disheartened feelings, especially Generation Z, i.e., those born between the mid-1990s and mid-2010s, out onto the roads protesting for planetary health—Fridays for Future showcases a firm commitment to making the planet greener and healthier. Originating from shared worries about protecting the environment and the increasing problems of global warming, this environmental movement quickly transformed into a powerful political pressure group (Marquardt 2020). The solutions they seek go beyond environmental concerns and are deeply connected to important political choices (Spajic et al. 2019). This example highlights that unresolved social issues find their audience to promote them. Moreover, there is an intricate relationship between civic work and political impacts.

In another example, during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, citizen innovation emerged as a powerful force in addressing critical shortages. In South Korea, "citizen hackers" demonstrated their creativity in 2020-21 by creating a mobile app to streamline access to medical masks. By collecting real-time data from medical stores, this app eased the burden of long lines and limited supplies. This grassroots initiative highlights the adaptability of civic engagement in swiftly addressing emerging societal needs and illustrates the dynamic relationship between citizens and governance (Paek & Hove 2023). Participatory budget initiatives, gaining global momentum, empower community members to actively influence budget allocations, ensuring resources are directed to priority areas. This participatory approach embodies the essence of civic engagement, magnifying the role of ordinary citizens in shaping public policy and fostering a stronger connection between governance and grassroots activism (ibid.).

The Arab Spring, often associated with social media, had roots in earlier cyber activism and grassroots efforts, notably in Tunisia. Young educated Tunisians voiced political dissent through platforms like Takrez, TuneZine, and Nawaat even before December 2010 (Breuer 2016). Facing high unemployment, institutional rigidity, and limited opportunities, these young people took to the streets after Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation in January 2011, expressing their readiness for change. Similarly, in 1995, Northern Ghana faced a potential civil conflict between "chiefly" and "non-chiefly" tribes, but youth-led initiatives, like the Northern Region Youth and Development Association (NORYDA), worked with NGOs to diffuse tensions (Kaye 2012). This



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story, highlighted by John Paul Lederach (2005), serves as inspiration for youth activists worldwide.

From planetary health advocacy to peace negotiations, young people are increasingly taking charge. They begin as individuals or small groups, sparking change within their communities. As successes accumulate, like-minded youth join in through awareness campaigns, and, if needed, protests. This collective action illustrates that when governments and societies neglect their needs, frustrated youth channel their energy into both online and offline activism.

The youth in rural regions of Pakistan are no exception to this transitional period. With one of the youngest populations in the world, 64 percent of Pakistan's more than 220 million inhabitants are below age 30 (UNDP 2017; Government of Pakistan 2023), Pakistan's youth is ticking like a time bomb. If not handled with care this blessing of a large young population can turn into a curse (Kamray 2021). In the absence of youth policies, increasing youth unemployment, and lack of basic facilities in the communities, young men take self-action to fill the fissures.

In rural Pashtun communities, traditionally, men of various ages and economic backgrounds can take part in community activities. Their level of involvement depends on factors like the type of governance structures, available resources, and the roles they play, such as leaders, committee members, or participants. Sometimes, having a family background associated with community leadership (like *navab*, *sardar*, *malik*, etc.) can also influence their participation. Community activities are typically organized through *jirgas*, *anjumans*, and committees that focus on specific policy areas. As one *anjuman* member explains, 'groups and committees are usually made for the benefit of the people of the community' (Interview #19).

Some of these groups fulfill tasks only on a temporary basis, like rebuilding infrastructure (schools, basic health units, water, sewage systems, renovation of bridges, etc.), responding to disasters, and dealing with security issues (forming *lashkars* (defense groups) for village patrolling). They can also be established permanently for activities related to neighborhoods, entertainment, and social welfare, like the mosque and sports committees.

Most of these groups have loosely structured themselves into *tanzeems* (organizations), *ittehads* (unions), committees, associations, or *anjumans*—different names and ways of bringing young men together for almost similar tasks. In this paper, the different nomenclatures adopted by these groups of young men have been bifurcated into committees



and anjumans. Both have a hierarchical structure, division of tasks among its office bearers, written or verbally agreed upon constitutions, financial means to support their activities, and electable terms in office. In my study, "committee" is a blanket term for a group of people who task themselves with one specific objective. For example, the mosque committees work on the administrative and financial matters related to the *sanda* (neighbourhood) mosque. The Local Certificate Committee works on verification of the Local or Domicile certificates for making a National Identity Card (NIC). The Parents-Teacher School Management Committee (PTSMC) is tasked with ensuring the smooth functioning of schools.

In contrast, anjumans have a bigger sphere of influence following the mainstream civil society organizations. Anjuman (انجمن, Persian origin) means gathering of people to consult on matters temporarily or permanently. Anjumans are youth-led organizations focusing on the social welfare of the people in their respective *sanda* or village. They voluntarily work as a medium between the community and its administration for infrastructural development, provision of basic necessities like clean drinking water, health facilities, free education, job opportunities for youth, etc. The membership of these anjumans is primarily young men.

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In pursuing their social goals for better services in their communities, the young men engage in discussions among each other, with community members, political representatives, and administrative officials. Meeting at *adha* (marketplace), *kotah* (private guest rooms attached to the houses), evening gatherings, or playgrounds, the young men engage in intense political discussions on local and national levels. Though as a group they abstain from political alliances or allegiances, individuals are free to pledge their allegiance or support to whoever they subscribe to. Moreover, these voluntary groups actively work for increased political awareness and participation in both conventional and non-conventional ways.

Study context: Pashtun millennials

Most of the young men who are active in the committees and anjumans could be considered millennials. Millennials constitute a distinct demographic cohort encompassing individuals born approximately from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s (Pyöriä et al. 2017). While the demarcation of generational boundaries lacks universal consensus, the prevalent classification identifies those born between 1981 and 1996 as belonging to the millennial generation. This group is alternatively labeled Generation Y or Gen Y, succeeding Generation X which was preceded by the Baby Boomers (Dimock 2019).



In the context of Pakistan, particularly within the Pashtun community, the term "millennials" itself holds no proper meaning. In fact, there is no direct translation of the word in Pashto. It is translated into *zwanan* (youth, masculine). However, it is important to recognise that the distinctive traits, work values, and ethical orientations of Pashtun millennials may not invariably align with the commonly attributed characteristics associated with this generational label. While popular perceptions often cast millennials as self-centered and highly ambitious, with a liking for frequent job changes (*ibid.*), these are generally Global North definitions and it is imperative to acknowledge the nuanced variations that exist within the Pashtun millennial population. What members of this generation have in common is that they are the in-between generation who already has some life experience but who is not yet in senior decision-making positions.

The cultural and sociopolitical backdrop of the Pashtun region, coupled with historical and traditional influences, significantly shapes the values and behaviours of Pashtun millennials. Factors such as family dynamics, community bonds, and regional conflict dynamics play a pivotal role in shaping their identities and perspectives. Thus, while the term "millennials" provides a chronological marker, the intricate interplay of cultural nuances within the Pashtun context necessitates a deeper exploration to comprehend the distinctive characteristics and aspirations that underlie the Pashtun millennial experience.

This nuanced understanding serves as a cornerstone for comprehending the intricate relationship between male Pashtun millennials and their civic engagement. As we delve into the subsequent sections, it becomes evident that this distinct generational cohort brings its own unique dynamics to the realm of community affairs and political participation, reflecting the multifaceted interplay between generational identity and sociopolitical context.

Methodology of the study

Empirical academic investigations into the practices of forming committees and their transformative role within the Pashtun belt of Balochistan have been limited, with only a few civil society reports available. To capture this transformation during the period from 2000 to 2020 (an active period for the formation of youth-led committees and *anjumans*), qualitative research methods were deemed most appropriate (Creswell 2014). Consequently, Grounded Theory (GT) was embraced as a theoretical and methodological framework for my doctoral research. This paper presents part of this work.



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Charmaz (2014) defines GT as 'a method of conducting qualitative research that focuses on creating conceptual frameworks or theories through building inductive analysis from the data' (187). GT, rooted in constructivism, has evolved into a third genre, known as Constructivist GT, which explores how participants perceive the subject of inquiry and construct relationships among its elements (ibid.).

Given the nature of the study, extensive field research was essential. Pilot studies were conducted in 2015 and 2016, providing valuable insights for formulating research questions and gaining a nuanced understanding of local perspectives in the district Pishin, Balochistan. Following proposal finalisation, three field visits occurred in 2018, 2019, and 2022 each spanning two months. A triangulated approach, drawing from participant observation, primary data collection, and semi-structured interviews, was employed in the fieldwork in district Pishin (Reeves et al. 2013). This methodological selection aligns with the GT approaches as described by its founders Glaser and Strauss (1968).

Within the four selected villages and Pishin Bazar (district capital), I actively engaged in various settings, including evening gatherings at village-based *adah* and *kotah* discussions within *sanda*, and committees and *anjuman* meetings, campaigns, and event planning. Fluent in the local Pashto language (my mother tongue as I also come from the same region) and attuned to cultural norms, I did not face hurdles in approaching the field except for approaching women interviewees, this is why I can only provide a gendered perspective. The impromptu engagements yielded natural interactions, providing data in natural settings.

While many committees and *anjumans* claimed to possess written rules and constitutions, it became apparent that they often did not exist. Instead, materials such as pamphlets, banners, brochures, audio and video messages, flyers, wall-chalking, and photographs related to public campaigns, and financial and administrative activities were collected from Pishin. Extensive visits to local administrative offices, welfare and education departments, and locally operating civil society organisations were undertaken to compile data on education status, youth policies, and community engagement initiatives.

The data collection process also encompassed semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions involving 32 participants, including:

- Committee and *anjuman* members: 14 young men between 22 to 35 years of age, representing different committees and *anjumans* were interviewed. Eight of these interviews were group interviews



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with two to six members of a committee or an anjuman present during the meeting. One or two respondents, mostly the president and general secretary, would answer the questions and others would also pitch into the discussion from time to time. Out of 14, six interviews were with individuals who were leading their respective groups. The sample, selected through the snowball technique³, included interviewees working on different levels through their committees and anjumans: four represented sanda level, five at the village level, and five at the tehsil and district level, ensuring diverse perspectives from various community tiers. These 14 interviews were focused on the structure, functions, finance, task division, decision-making process, etc. within committees and *anjumans*.

- Tribal and political *masharan* (elders): Five tribal and political elders contributed insights into community dynamics pre-2000 and the evolution of youth civic engagement over the past two decades. These elders have been part of youth-led committees in their youth.
- Youth political activists and civil society members: Five young individuals associated with mainstream political parties or movements, along with five civil society representatives, were interviewed. The 10 interviewees in this sample were also young men between 25 to 35 years of age. These interviews were focused on the politicization and civic engagement of the youth in district Pishin. The political activists were either serving members of mainstream political parties' youth-wing members or serving members of their units.⁴ Whereas, the civil society interviewees were focused on the youth and community engagement of the mainstream civil society organizations.

The data analysis encompassed several stages, including the formation of categories through inductive analysis, open and axial coding, and memoing, as outlined in the methodology developed by Charmaz (2014).

Literature vs. the field: defining key concepts

The two key terms in this paper, political participation and civic engagement, are not one and the same. Campbell (2009) distinguishes between the two in the following manner: political participation relates to activities aimed at influencing public policies, while civic engagement does not necessarily involve such efforts. Here I will dwell into the literary definition(s) and compare them to the understanding of these terms from the interview participants.

*Political participation*

Political participation lacks a universally agreed-upon definition. Verba et al. (1995) define it as 'voluntary activities by ordinary citizens directed towards influencing, directly or indirectly, political outcomes at various levels of the political system' (38-39). It means regular people choosing to do things that can affect how politics works at different levels. It is important to focus on actions in this definition. This means we do not count being part of political groups or saying we like certain political ideas. This idea only includes things people do without getting monetary compensation, like speaking out and even breaking rules to change how the government acts. The outcomes this definition talks about are about who receives good things, benefits, or statuses that are not about family, school, or work. These gains can change because of laws and rules. Political participation also covers disagreements about how things are shared, like choosing what to buy, but it does not include just having fun or being social (de Rooij 2012; McLean & McMillan 2009).

Political participation is typically categorised into two primary types: "conventional" or "traditional" and "unconventional" or "latent" methods (see table 1). Conventional forms are highly organised and typically adhere to established legal norms (Dalton 2008). For example, political party membership, voting, engaging in lobbying, attending political gatherings, and contacting government officials. Whereas, unconventional forms include activities like participating in protest marches, signing petitions, or boycotting products. Bourne (2010) identified various unconventional participation activities, including protests, demonstrations, community blockades, conflicts with security forces, blogging, and offering social commentaries on talk radio. Marsh (1990) described such activities as "elite-challenging", suggesting they may involve confrontational participation, although it is essential to note that unconventional practices do not necessarily have to be illegal or against the law (de Rooij & Reeskens, 2014).



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Type	Conventional (traditional)	Unconventional (latent)
Characteristics	Traditional, parliamentary, institutionalized activities, lawful and objectively acceptable acts of political participation	Extra-institutional, indirect forms of political action, extra-parliamentary, inviting illegalities
Actions	Voting, Membership of political bodies, launching and signing of petitions, etc.	Demonstrations, protests, lobbying, occupy movements, etc.
Examples from Balochistan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Membership and participation in political parties like Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP), Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam F (JUI-F), Jamiat Islami (JI), Awami National Party (ANP), Pakistan Tahreek-i-Insaf (PTI), and other small and local parties. - Voting and campaigning for these parties. - Member student wings of the political parties. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Demonstrating against corruption and favouritism in bureaucracy and political representatives - Protests against corruption scandals of MPAs and local government administration - Pressure groups to exacerbate and initiate the civic work initiatives in Pishin - Awareness rallies in Pishin Bazar

Table 1, Types of political participation and their relevance in Balochistan, Pakistan

Political participation, among the young respondents, is widely perceived in the "conventional" sense. As one interviewee puts it: political participation entails 'one's affiliation with politics and political parties. It means in what way and how are people connected to the politics [parties] around them' (Interview #23). This definition resonated with the majority of respondents, who expressed similar sentiments in different words. Political party membership, voting, and contesting elections are considered political acts. Unconventional forms are viewed primarily in their civic and service delivery lenses. Questions about political learning, political discussions, and political awareness were met with certain hesitation from the majority of the young and elderly respondents alike. This hesitation was due to two reasons.



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First, 11 out of the 14 committees and anjumans in the sample, consider themselves nonpolitical as they do not affiliate themselves with any of the mainstream political parties as a group from these platforms. Political activism is considered individual members' personal choice. A committee or an anjuman is a place for civic engagement only. Civic engagement and political participation are seen as two distinct acts. Civic engagement is considered a responsibility to reciprocate in society by voluntarily working for it. Whereas political participation, conventional participation in mainstream political activities, is considered an individual's prerogative. For example, an affiliation of a committee with the Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) can upset the followers of other political parties' who are equal stakeholders in a committee.

Second, some were hesitant due to a lack of precise terminology that fully captures the concept of political participation in the Pashto language. In Pashto, the term *siyasi gaddun* comes closest to representing this idea but is rarely used in everyday language. On the other hand, *siyasi pohanna*, which translates to political awareness or understanding, would prompt responses aligned with the conventional understanding of political participation only.

As observed during the various field visits, young men get extensively involved in unconventional forms of political participation from the platforms of committees and anjumans. They get involved in spreading political awareness through various gatherings, such as corner meetings in villages, after-prayer gatherings, and meetings in other male-dominated settings. The formation of committees to advocate for rights and awareness regarding citizens' responsibilities like street cleanliness, and ensuring staff's presence in public schools and hospitals, among other issues, are examples of unconventional youth political participation. Additionally, forming a united front through the promotion of *ittehad* (unity), protests over mismanagement of public funds, and accountability of the public representatives constitute other facets of these diverse unconventional participation methods.

For example, the Batezai Youth Organization is a village-based young anjuman dedicated to the social and welfare development of the Batezai village. They engage in regular visits to the village Basic Health Unit (BHU) and school to ensure medical staff presence and its infrastructural restoration. They build a network of young men with administrative and political representatives for job opportunities and resolution to local issues confronted by the youth. Among other civic engagement tasks, they also try to garner government and NGO support for the village. The anjuman is financially dependent on its members and external patrons. They maintain transparent financial records and allocate funds for BHU



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and school repairs, water tube well maintenance, and street cleaning. The organisation operates democratically, conducting elections for its cabinet members every six months, with performance assessments and potential changes made by the full member body.

The members of the Batezai Youth Organization engage in political discussions in their weekly meetings, negotiate terms and conditions with political parties' candidates who want their support in return, and work as a pressure group to push forward their complaints to different government departments. In a group interview its members, most of whom were either employed in the government or private sector, students, and businessmen, talked about their work at length but did not consider their work as a form of political participation. They considered the above-described unconventional forms of political participation as *khidmat* (community service). However, by Verba et al.'s (1995) definition, the Batezai Youth Organization's activities can be clubbed into unconventional forms of political participation.

Civic engagement

In contrast to political participation, civic engagement refers to activities by 'ordinary citizens that are intended to influence circumstances in society that is of relevance to others, outside the own family and circle of close friends' (Adler & Goggin 2005, 241). The definition itself is very broad encompassing any action taken by individuals or groups helping their society members outside their direct relationships. This means that the actions of an individual are not limited to family members and close relatives but extends to other in the society as well. These actions could be political discussions, charity, helping the needy, awareness campaigns, reconstruction, or building infrastructure, etc. (Berger 2009).

In the rural Pashtun regions of Balochistan, Pakistan, civic engagement is seen as an integral part of community life embedded in Pashtunwali. One of the respondents defined Pashtunwali as 'when Pashtuns [referring to male elders only] sit together to make a rule regarding something in consensus' (Interview #5). There is no limit to which civic engagements can or cannot be part of Pashtunwali. When asked how they define civic engagement, the interviewees consistently emphasised individuals' responsibility to the community, rather than seeing it as an optional voluntary action. The definitions of civic engagement were focused on the 'common good,' 'treating others as you would like to be treated yourself,' and efforts to 'resolve commonly confronted issues' (Interview #14, 19, 22). Unlike the perception about political participation, civic engagement is considered a selfless act which is a compulsion



for those with more economic means and/or political power to back them up.

To respondents, civic engagement is all about promoting the well-being of everyone in the community. It means that helping those in need, such as widows, the poor, or orphans, is not seen as a charitable act done for recognition but rather as a societal duty that everyone is expected to fulfil.

How does civic engagement affect political participation?

The interplay between civic engagement and political participation can be explained through Cognitive Engagement Theory (CET). CET is centered on the idea that cognitive engagement measures the willingness and capacity of individuals to acquire knowledge about politics, ultimately motivating them to participate. It encompasses the level of effort young people are prepared to exert in their pursuit of political involvement and the duration of their commitment to this endeavour (Abdulrauf et al. 2015). The committees and anjumans in district Pishin, the case study for this research, function as initial platforms for early discussions on societal issues and how those issues impact different areas. Hence, triggering a process of political conscientisation in young men through community engagement activities.

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For instance, on a visit to the village BHU, Habib (pseudonym) noticed that the building was in an abject condition, the boundary wall was half gone, and the windows and doors were missing. Seeing no staff, doctor, or any equipment at the village's only public health clinic that is expected to serve a population of roughly 15000 population, Habib decided to take action and informed a couple of neighborhood friends first. The three of them mutually decided to take action to render the BHU functional. They charted out a plan to reach out to the District Health Officer (DHO), members of parliament from the constituency and other dignitaries, and to raise the community members' suggestions in different gatherings. The number of people on the committee can increase as more young men volunteer to assist in this task. As a consequence of increased involvement, a committee is formed with a defined structure, division of tasks, term in office for the executive body, etc. Until, the goal of restoration of the BHU is achieved the process has already triggered civil participation.

Ekman and Amnå (2012) introduce the concept of "civil participation" as a form of unconventional political participation which they describe as "pre-political" or "potentially political", indicating that these acts could be of great relevance for future conventional political action. The authors further categorise these actions into "civic engagement", which



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includes voluntary work to improve conditions in the local community, charity work, or helping others; and "social involvement", which includes a personal interest in politics and societal issues, attentiveness to political issues, and activities based on personal interest and attention to politics and societal issues.

Having interest and knowledge about politics and social issues only really makes a difference if it motivates people to actually get involved and take action (Whiteley 2005). As mentioned in the definition of political participation, "action" is the key term (Verba et al. 1995). From our previous example, if Habib had noticed the decaying BHU but would have never gone further to take any kind of action, the process of political participation would have stopped there. Since Habib decided to gather information by taking notes, share that information with other young men, involve them in the planning and decision-making processes, receive feedback from the community, and start approaching the political and administrative representatives, the action has already been initiated. Similar actions by different individuals or small groups forming committees and anjumans in other villages increase civic engagement among young men and hence increase the chances of political participation.

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Increased civic engagement from the Pashtun millennials means they have been spending time understanding the problems confronted by their societies. Their engagement brings them in contact with community members, stakeholders, gatekeepers, etc. They engage in dialogues with their peers to act on issues being confronted by society. The Pashtun millennials engage in all aspects of political participation but do not recognize those acts as they are defined in the literature. In practice, all the traits for political participation mentioned above, either conventional or nonconventional, are present in the working and functioning of committees and anjumans led by young millennial men.

Emerging themes

Community affairs and its activities were generally considered to be the hobby and job of masharan who were able to make decisions for the communities. As we can see from the evidence given above, this perception has been challenged by millennial men in the rural Pashtun regions of Balochistan. The young men not only actively take part in community affairs but try to alter its course by addressing the issues confronted by their communities: better education and health facilities, ensuring the presence of medical and academic staff, accountability of the political and administrative representatives, catering to the needs of poor, ensuring access to clean drinking water, clean streets and



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functioning sewerage systems among others. From the platforms of committees and anjumans, the young men have also started claiming roles that are specifically associated with masharan. Like, jirga establishing political alliances, and leading protests are generally considered to be led by elders. However, the young men have been actively involved in these arenas as well. In doing so, the young men have increased their civic engagement leading to increased awareness of political participation and simultaneously they also challenge social conventions. The following prominent themes that emerged from the collected data are listed below.

No direct political engagement

Political involvement is an individual choice and we do not influence those choices of the people.
(Interview #14)

Participation in conventional politics, such as voting for a political party, adhering to a specific political ideology, and affiliation with political parties from the platform of a committee or an anjuman is mostly forbidden by anjumans. Such activities are considered to be privileges of an individual. With the exception of two anjumans, all 14 committees and anjumans approached for this research, drew a clear line between political and social engagements. There are two reasons for this decision. One, since anjumans have tasked themselves with bringing about a specific change for the good of the community, they focus exclusively on achieving those objectives. Two, the members of committees and anjumans have a diverse political following, making it difficult to have a consensus on political affiliations.

The Elaqqai Ittehad Cricket Association, commonly known as the Elaqqai Committee, is district Pishin's leading body for organising and overseeing cricket events—the most popular sports game in the region. Established in 2002, it organises cricket tournaments for several weeks after Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha involving over 300 cricket teams with more than 4,000 players and more than 20,000 spectators. Led by a core committee of up to 15 members, the Elaqqai Committee delegates organisational responsibilities to local 'organising committees' in 15 villages (Interview #10). These organising committees, led by young men from their villages, take on the organisational responsibilities for conducting the matches. The Elaqqai Committee aims are to resolve sport-related conflicts arising among the young men in cricket tournaments, unite youth from different villages, govern game rules, ensure fair play, keep youth away from drugs and negative activities via increased sports activities, and advocate for entertainment opportunities



for the youth in Pishin.

The executive or core committee of the Elaqui Ittehad Cricket Association comprises staunch supporters and office-bearers from various political parties. However, 'when we enter cricket or the committee, then we are only cricketers irrespective of our political background' (ibid.). They maintain a rule within the committee that prohibits any political party presence or the display of political flags. According to the committee members, the display of political affiliations increases debates on who is right or wrong, thus deviating them from their primary objectives.

However, as observed during many cricket matches, the players and spectators engage extensively in political discussions. The following aspects of unconventional political participation emerge from interviews and participatory observation of their events. First, the Elaqui Committee has brought young men in thousands together from different corners of the district for the last two decades consecutively twice a year. This makes it a unique sustainable platform for young men to share and learn from each other in their interactions in cricket playgrounds. They are also a neutral zone where young men with different political party affiliations, followers of banned extremist groups, and apolitical youth interact.

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Second, the committee and its organising committees actively pursue the provincial sports ministry, political representatives, and public administration officials for sports funds. The Elaqui Committee updates news about the announcement of sports funds on its Facebook page and disseminates the information to its groups as well. They also act as a pressure group against corruption in public sports funds. Third, the cricket matches also serve as platforms for politicians and tribal elite, invited as chief guests, to address a big crowd of young men. In return, the committees get some financial assistance as an award from the chief guests. Fourth, the committee also pushes relevant government officials for the construction and maintenance of the cricket playgrounds in the region, hence they engage in the extension of infrastructure.

The act of forming a group, committee, or an anjuman to take initiatives to achieve the common good is an act of civil participation (Ekman & Amnå 2012). These platforms serve as initial political learning and engagement arenas. For anjumans or committees like the ones in the sample, 'it is vital that the people have some understanding about politics around them... every *tanzeem* [refereeing to committees] is political in nature' given the impact of their work (Interview #17).

While the majority of committees refrain from direct political involvement, emphasising the primacy of individual political choices, a minority



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actively participates in conventional political activities as a group, such as contesting elections or aligning with mainstream political parties. Regardless of their direct political participation, all members of these committees and anjumans actively engage in political discussions, advocate for accountability of administrative and political officials, and work diligently to promote political awareness about the rights and responsibilities of citizens. This nuanced approach to youth political participation through civic engagement highlights the dynamic nature of their involvement, which extends beyond the conventional boundaries of political activities and underscores the importance of both individual autonomy and collective action in shaping the political landscape in the Pashtun belt of Balochistan.

Out of the 14 committees and anjumans approached, only two anjumans engaged in conventional political activities. These two either contested in common elections independently or aligned themselves with mainstream political parties. For instance, the Naujawan Action Committee, a youth-led anjuman announced its candidates to contest for provincial and national assembly before the 2018 general elections. Seeing that their candidates stood less chance of winning, they mutually decided to ally with any political party that had a greater chance of winning. Hence, they allied with Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Fazal-ur-Rehman (JUI-F). They pledged their support to JUI-F in return for monetary assistance to their anjuman and future guarantees for assistance in youth employment or the provision of basic facilities (Interview #6). The deal was deemed a success by committee leaders as their focus was on gaining leverage and services and infrastructural development for their village in exchange for their votes to the winning candidate who can guarantee those provisions.

Moreover, the Batezai Youth Committee, comprising young men with diverse political affiliations, decided to use their votes as a means to gain influence with a political party as well. During a group discussion with six of its members, they mentioned, 'it is our duty to vote, and we intend to use it in a manner that benefits the entire village...we have discussed in our meetings the possibility of supporting our own candidate [from Balochistan Awami Party (BAP)]. However, this is not a final decision but is being considered' (Interview #9). They were less decisive in supporting one candidate as an anjuman in comparison to the Naujawan Action Committee. However, these two were the only exceptions who decided to be involved in conventional political processes.

*Support for the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM)*

The increasing political conscientisation of youth can be witnessed through participation and support of social and political movements. An example of this was the mounting sympathies for, and some level of participation in, the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM)—or Pashtun Protection Movement, initiated in 2018 by a young human rights activist, Manzoor Pashteen, who is an educated millennial himself. The PTM demands rights and protection for Pashtuns living in the districts of the formally Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan (Yousaf 2019; Aslam & Neads 2021).

Originally named Mehsud Tahafuz Movement in 2014, the movement initially demanded the removal of deadly landmines that had been laid down in civilian areas of former FATA regions and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa during military operations against the Tahreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). In January 2018, after the extra-judicial killing of a young Pashtun, Naqeebullah Mehsud, in Karachi, the movement renamed itself to Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) to express the concerns of Pashtuns in general—demanding human rights protection for all Pashtuns. Keeping nonviolence at its core, the PTM has been protesting to bring attention to key issues of Pashtun communities: forced disappearances, extra-judicial killings, humiliating treatment at military checkpoints, and racial profiling, among many. Alienated by mainstream Urdu media and dealt with force by the state, the PTM rose to prominence in the Pashtun regions.

The movement gained lightening momentum among Pashtuns of all ages across the country even triggering protests in its support in Afghanistan and the Pashtun expats across the world. It is one of the movements that challenged the strong military establishment in Pakistan—the most powerful force behind the country's political decision-making. Its protests and processions grew bigger day by day and the symbolic PTM Cap (a red and black round cap worn by Manzoor Pashteen) could be seen all over the country, from Karachi in the south to Chitral in the north. Seeing the rapid rise in popularity and support, the military establishment cracked down on PTM in 2019 and banned its presence on mainstream and social media. The crackdown scarred many of its followers making open discussions about PTM difficult.

What I experienced during my fieldwork was that young sympathisers did not easily talk about their support in open gatherings anymore. They would express their opinions in a safer and trustworthy environment only. The fear of being put on trial, to be named on an extra-judicial killing list, and social shaming from pro-government actors, stopped many young people from speaking their minds out loud. It was usually



in informal discussions and small talks in a trusted environment where respondents would express their support for the PTM. Once the recorder was on, during the interviews, except for a few members of the movement, the young men would deny supporting or sympathising with the PTM.

The PTM exemplified the swift process of the Pashtun youth's political mobilisation. Men involved initially in committees and anjumans openly endorsed the movement due to the benefits it promised, including the removal of military checkpoints and a decrease in racial profiling. However, this endorsement was short-lived as it incurred the disapproval of Pakistan's most influential institution. Consequently, the political engagement of young men in rural Balochistan reverted to seeking support from mainstream political parties and discussing the PTM in private, behind closed doors.

Political awareness platforms

Political awareness is awareness of our rights. When people know about their rights then they know whom to vote for. I am voting for a specific person; can I ask this person for something tomorrow? If I am not aware of who I am voting for that definitely is not good. To be aware of your own political rights that is political awareness.

(Interview #12)

The formation of committees or *tanzeemsazi*, the process of creating associations, by educated young men to address community issues is, in itself, an expression of increased political awareness (Interview #14). This awareness is demonstrated through the continuous establishment of new groups and committees with clearly defined structures, office bearers, distribution of tasks, a written constitution, and a selective field of operations. Hence, disseminating political learning among its members. Some of the emerging sub-themes from the interviews regarding political awareness and rights advocacy are as follows:

First, committees actively "promote an understanding of political representation", emphasising that elected officials are there to serve the people who vote for them. They take the initiative to educate their members about the roles and responsibilities of MPAs Members of the Provincial Assembly (MPAs) and Members of the National Assembly (MNAs), as well as the functions of various government departments and organisations. For example, one anjuman clarified that installing an electric transformer is not the direct responsibility of a minister but falls under the jurisdiction of a specific government body called WAPDA (Water And Power Development Authority). Hence, they identified who



the respective contact persons or offices are.

Second, anjumans and committees also foster "awareness regarding the involvement of the political elite and the military establishment in creating political parties" for their own interests. Young individuals discuss the formation of political parties such as the Balochistan Awami Party (BAP), or the Pakistan Muslim League Quaid-i-Azam (PML-Q). Irrespective of the following, the young men engage in discussions on what left, right, or center-leaning political parties are and who is tacitly supporting those parties.

Third, those anjumans working for civic services delivery, when and where the need be, "engaged in demonstrations and protests". For instance, they participated in demonstrations alongside farmers to address electricity shortages, conducted door-to-door campaigns to raise awareness about children's school enrollment and dropouts, and held press conferences to denounce political and administrative corruption or human rights violations.

Fourth, the committees and anjumans actively engage community members through door-to-door outreach, after-mosque gatherings of men, evening gatherings at adah, corner meetings, etc. in the campaign to promote "awareness about political rights and responsibilities". They facilitate political debates and discussions to highlight the potential advantages or disadvantages of specific political decisions. At times, with permission from the majority of its community members, anjumans also act as gatekeepers to negotiate terms and conditions with political parties in return for their vote, like in the case of the Naujawan Action Committee mentioned earlier.

In conclusion, the members of these committees and anjumans play a crucial role in promoting political discourses. They hold administrative and political figures accountable and actively contribute to enhancing awareness about the rights and responsibilities of citizens in the political realm. Their activities are indicative of a growing political consciousness among the younger generation.

Youth-led Jirga initiatives

Jirga is considered one of the hallmarks of Pashtunwali. Jirga or a council of elders is a speedy justice dispensation system that is 'summoned to resolve local disputes and to deliberate on how to respond to threats and challenges' (Siddique 2014, 14). Jirgas are practiced in many regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan with different variations and local interpretations (Siddiqi 2012), with its own localised rules to resolve the conflict between aggrieved parties. Jirga enjoys the status of judiciary



among Pashtuns (Interview #4). In the rural Pashtun regions of Balochistan, a *jirga*, typically consists of at least three *masharan*. It is commonly summoned by the aggrieved parties when they try to reach a resolution by surrendering their *ikhtiyar* (authority/consent) to the mutually agreed upon *jirga* members. The *jirga* members, usually consisting of a sympathiser for each side and a neutral person, meet with each party, discuss, and arrive at a mutual decision in a relatively shorter time than in comparison to the state judiciary.

Usually, *jirga* works in accordance with the religious and traditional norms culturally practiced in the region for centuries (Wardak 2017; Shinwari 2011). The decision from *jirga* members is generally focused on a win-win situation for both parties. Their decision is usually final and binding on both parties. Seeing their importance in the culturally rich regions of the Pashtun belts of Balochistan, the governing administrative authorities like the Deputy Commissioner (DC), administrative head of the district, have not only accepted their role on many occasions but also formed *jirgas* of their own as well.

Dispute resolution through *jirga* is one specific role assigned to *masharan* in the community. However, some youth-led *anjumans* like the Naujawan Action Committee have taken up the role of *jirgas* in resolving intra and inter-village conflicts. In 2018, the Naujawan Action Committee gathered young men in hundreds to travel to a nearby village where two families had been engaged in bitter rivalries for the last decade. The conflict which started with a small fight in the village marketplace, resulted in claiming multiple lives on both sides. Notable elders, politicians, and religious figures tried to defuse this rivalry through many *jirgas*, with no success. However, the negotiations brokered by the youth-led committee brought the bitter rivalry of *baddal* (revenge) to a calm.

The Naujawan Action Committee acted like a *jirga* in this dispute. This was the first example where a youth-led organization took up the role of *jirga*. This is not only noteworthy but also important for this research. Traditionally, the role of *jirga* is only associated with *masharan* and young men are only seen as silent spectators in its sessions. However, this *anjuman* set an example that young men's roles shall not be limited to arenas of community affairs which are traditionally viewed as roles specified for *masharan*.

The actions of the Naujawan Action Committee received both praise and negative responses. The critique coming from both *masharan* and young members of other *anjumans* saw their actions as an infringement on the role of *masharan* in society. The critics stated that young men are neither qualified nor traditionally suitable enough for the role of



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mediation between two parties. Those who welcomed young people taking the initiative of mediating in a decade-long rivalry appreciated their efforts and viewed jirga roles as not being limited by age qualification.

Apart from major mediations, the young men-led committees have also been playing mediation roles in resolving conflicts among young men at playgrounds, neighborhoods, or adha. This role is viewed by elders as a mature sign of young men being serious about their role in society. Mediating conflicts between the young men in inter or intra-village conflicts is not seen critically as it does not challenge the role of masharan.

Reaching out to officials and their accountability

Public officials and political representatives are public servants.
(Interview #13)

From the platform of their committees and anjumans, the young men regularly conduct visits to schools, Basic Health Units (BHUs), and village tube wells for drinking water. If they notice any discrepancies, absence of staff, shortage of materials or medicines, etc., they call upon committee meetings to take decisions on further actions. In most cases, sub-committees are formed with the task of following up with public officials on the lack of services. The members of sub-committees are appointed based on their educational background, skill to write appeals to officials, and ability to speak and plead the case. They are usually also accompanied by members with lesser educational qualifications, for their train purposes.

The committees and anjumans actively preach the idea that public officials are answerable to them, citizens of Pakistan, and that their salary is paid from their tax money. The committees disseminate information on reaching WAPDA officers for power shortfall, the District Education Officer (DEO) for schools related problems, the District Health Officer (DHO) for discrepancies in BHUs, the Assistant Commissioner (AC) and Deputy Commissioner (DC) for administrative issues, and NGOs for provision of specific social services. As one committee member explains: '... two to three representatives of the committee visit and talk to the XEN [Executive Engineer – responsible for power supply] of WAPDA. If the BHU doctor is not coming, 2 members of the committee visit DHO to complain' (Interview #9). In addition, the educated youth in committees write complaints to administrations and other related agencies to take action against them. As the same committee member goes on:



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For example, we wrote applications to the concerned departments for the development of our schools: reconstruction of infrastructure and installation of missing doors and windows, rebuilding the missing boundary wall, and on the matter of ghost teachers, etc. If they are still not active, we try to approach the higher officials with our complaints... we had a meeting with our BHU in charge. We asked him to show the equipment and staff registers. We would tally the equipment and staff to the register [available at the BHU]. Then, we would ask him about the missing people and equipment. (ibid.)

A group approach is better than an individual approaching the officials as a pressure group. A group of 10 people are heard better than a single complaint.

When we go to complain in a group of 10 people, our complaint has the weightage. In this way, even if we are wrong or we blame someone, we will be heard. We would not do so; this is just an example. A person alone is not heard in the way a group would be. (ibid.)

These are but a few examples from many where the committees hold public officials, political representatives, ministries, local authorities, and NGO officials accountable for the tasks they are assigned to fulfil.

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In addition, the young men from the committees and anjuman also work on collecting pieces of evidence on corruption and embezzlement of public funds. At times, they also track favouritism in the employment process in the public sector.

Concerning the misuse of public funds, an anjuman member tracked the accounts of 2 million PKR for the repair of the hospital in their village being embezzled by the officials of the Building and Road Department (B&R) and the contractor. The funds were allocated by the provincial minister after repeated visits by the anjuman. They followed up on the matter with the authorities in question who in return tried to silence the anjuman by offering 3 hundred thousand PKR in bribes. Furious, the anjuman took legal action against the authorities and took the responsible parties to the Provincial Mohtasib (Provincial Ombudsman). One member recounts: 'The case went on for 9 months. Finally, they did some work in the hospital: tiles, colouring, doors, etc., much less than the initial allocated budget' (Interview #15). The success, in this case, was possible through anjuman's collective action, portraying that organised and sustained action can be more effective in addressing issues than individual complaints.

The efforts of the youth committee in approaching government officials and writing applications to government agencies demonstrate the



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importance of collective action in demanding accountability and creating pressure. The committees' approach to government officials for the repair of schools and provision of medicine and equipment for the BHU highlights the need for organized pressure groups to demand better public services.

Democratic practices in the committees

The majority of the committees and anjumans have elected office bearers, a core or executive committee, and well-defined divisions of tasks like the President, General Secretary, Finance Secretary, Executive Members, etc. They opt for elections when choosing leadership positions, regarding decision-making on issues where consensus is not achieved, and on the allocation of financial resources. The election of leadership positions is conducted after a specified term of office for each committee—varying from 3 months to 5 years. The electoral college for such elections comprises the entire member body, encompassing all young men within the committees or anjumans. Each member holds the right to cast a single vote by show of hand or secret ballot, contributing to the democratic process of selecting leadership positions. Additionally, some committees conduct their elections in the presence of an external observer, to ensure impartiality and objectivity in the election process.

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Mutual agreement among core committee members in decision-making is important to most of the committees and anjumans' endeavors. In instances where consensus is elusive, the core committee decides with the majority voting in favor or against. The 50 per cent plus one vote ensures a democratic resolution to significant issues. However, what I observed in reality is that decision-making authority generally lies with a limited number of leading members i.e., 3 to 6 core-committee members.

For matters integral to the committee's course or mission, a general assembly of the entire member body convenes. For instance, the Naujawan Action Committee decided to align with the JUI-F political party in the general elections of 2018. This was not a decision that could have been taken only by the core committee members. Rather, the whole member body of the committee had to be called upon as the decision concerned community members beyond the anjuman's membership body (Interview #6).

The practices of electing leading members, voting on issue prioritisation, and formulation of a constitution are the initial leanings about the democratic processes on the platforms of committees and anjumans. In times of general elections in the country, as observed by the author



in the 2018 general election, the committees and especially anjumans become proactive in the political process in their respective regions of influence: more corner meetings take place to call upon people to vote, more negotiations with political parties for perks in return for privileges and demanded services, and more politically motivated interactions with community members.

Conclusion

The rural regions of Balochistan, Pakistan, bear witness to a transformation in political participation, courtesy of the educated Pashtun youth's engagement in community affairs. This engagement redefines the traditional concept of political participation, encompassing a wide range of unconventional and civil acts that go beyond the boundaries of party affiliation and electoral processes.

While these young individuals actively participate in community building and problem-solving, they consciously avoid direct political engagement from the platforms of their committees and anjumans. They acknowledge the importance of individual choices in political matters, allowing their peers to make their own decisions regarding party affiliations and conventional political activities. This respect for personal autonomy is a defining feature of their civic engagement. This does not mean that they do not engage in political discussions over diverse issues in efforts to alter ideological followings.

In their pursuit of political awareness, these young Pashtuns have lent support to movements such as the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM). This movement, led by a dynamic millennial himself, Manzoor Pashteen, resonates with many due to its nonviolent approach to advocating for Pashtun rights. However, the fear of repercussions from powerful state entities has led to discreet expressions of their sympathies for PTM, highlighting the complex nature of political engagement in their region.

Their community platforms have become powerful instruments for disseminating political awareness, emphasising the roles and responsibilities of elected officials, government departments, and the transitory nature of political parties driven by self-interest. These platforms foster open discussions and debates, contributing to the enhancement of political literacy among their members.

In an interesting twist, these young Pashtun committees have also assumed conflict resolution roles and responsibilities of the jirga that are traditionally led by community elders. This has sparked debates within the community, with some welcoming this generational progression and



others questioning their qualifications for this duty which is conventionally the prerogative of elder men. They also play essential roles in mediating conflicts at the local level, transitioning from individual-level interactions to collective responsibilities.

Their engagement with public officials is a significant contribution. They hold these officials accountable by leveraging their collective strength to ensure efficient public service provision, in this way, they often act as intermediaries. They go beyond individual complaints, collecting evidence of corruption and favouritism in public fund allocation. Their actions underscore the power of organised collective action in seeking transparency and accountability.

In conclusion, the educated youth in rural Balochistan exemplify political participation through their civic engagement. A question that requires further attention is the role of young men who are not educated in these processes, similarly the engagement and activism of young women should be investigated to better understand social dynamics. Since 2000, which can generally be considered the inception year for the formation of committees, youth engagement in community affairs has increased resulting in increased unconventional political participation. They transcend conventional boundaries and engage in a multitude of ways, offering a powerful model for the future youth. This model of political participation goes beyond traditional party politics and electoral processes, emphasising the broader civic engagement that benefits communities. In this way, they empower a new generation of Pashtun youth to become active contributors to their society and its political development, setting the stage for a more inclusive and participatory future in Balochistan, Pakistan.

Endnotes

¹ This paper is part of the 5th chapter of my PhD dissertation *Community Affairs in Transition: educated-youth's civic engagement in Pishin*, submitted to the Institut für Asien- und Afrikawissenschaften at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

² The main pillars of Pashtunwali are *Melmastya* (hospitality), *Badal* (revenge), *Nanawatay* (providing asylum), *Tarboorwali* (agnatic rivalry), *Siyali* (competition within an extended family), *Nang* (honor), *Namus* (chastity of women) and *Jirga* (council of the elders) (Khan et al. 2019).

³ The Snowball technique for sampling required me to find the first interview partner and then ask them at the end about other individuals, committees, anjumans, etc. they wanted to share. I would collect the contact information, in case they had it, from the previous interviewee and contact the potential interviewees after doing some research on their work. As there is no written record of the committees, anjumans, and individuals, the research meant asking people in my network if they have heard about the person and their work.

⁴ Big political parties with heavy vote bank in Pishin like the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP), Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam F (JUI-F) and Awami National Party (ANP) have their constituencies



divided in units. These units are smaller geographical and demographical divisions for parties' administrative and political control. For example, a certain village will be one unit with its unit president, general secretary, etc. responsible for the political party affairs in that village.

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