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CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES: POLITICAL SCIENCE MEETS ANTHROPOLOGY

Tariq Ali *
Department of Political Science, University of Karachi, Karachi, Pakistan.
Email: tariq.ali@uok.edu.pk

Amina Khan
Department of Anthropology, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.
Email: amina.khan@qau.edu.pk

Abstract

In today's rapidly globalizing world, multicultural societies are facing an increasing number of conflicts arising from cultural, political, and economic differences. The complexities of these conflicts often transcend national borders, creating challenges for effective conflict resolution. This article explores the intersection of political science and anthropology in addressing conflict resolution in multicultural societies. By drawing from theories in both disciplines, the paper highlights how cultural understanding, political governance, and social structures influence conflict dynamics and resolution strategies. The paper also delves into case studies from Pakistan, showcasing both successes and failures in conflict resolution in multicultural settings. The article concludes by proposing an integrated framework combining political science and anthropology to offer more sustainable and inclusive solutions for multicultural societies.

Keywords

Multiculturalism, Conflict Resolution, Political Science, Anthropology.

INTRODUCTION

Multicultural societies, characterized by the coexistence of various ethnic, cultural, and religious groups, often experience social and political conflicts due to differences in values, beliefs, and practices. These conflicts can arise in various forms, including ethnic violence, religious intolerance, and political disenfranchisement. The traditional approaches to conflict resolution, often rooted in political science, focus primarily on power structures, legal frameworks, and governance. However, these approaches can overlook the underlying cultural dynamics that play a crucial role in the success or failure of conflict resolution efforts.

Anthropology, with its emphasis on understanding human societies, cultures, and behaviors, provides valuable insights into the social structures and cultural narratives that shape conflicts in multicultural settings. Political science, on the other hand, offers theoretical models for governance, diplomacy, and policy-making that can guide conflict resolution processes. By integrating political science with anthropology, we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of how to effectively manage conflicts in multicultural societies.

Understanding Conflict in Multicultural Societies

Definition of Multiculturalism and Its Challenges

Multiculturalism refers to the coexistence of diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious groups within a single society. This concept emphasizes the recognition and celebration of cultural diversity, wherein each group retains its distinct cultural identity while also participating in the broader social, economic, and political systems. In multicultural societies, the goal is to foster mutual respect, understanding, and inclusion, where individuals can freely practice their traditions and values.

However, while multiculturalism offers the potential for enriching societies with diverse perspectives and experiences, it also presents significant challenges. These challenges arise from the complexities of managing diverse identities and integrating various groups into a cohesive national or social framework. Some key challenges of multiculturalism include:

Cultural Assimilation vs. Integration: Multicultural societies often struggle with balancing cultural assimilation, where minority groups are expected to adopt the dominant culture, and cultural integration, where diverse groups maintain their unique identities while contributing to the broader society. The tension between these two can lead to feelings of exclusion and alienation, particularly among marginalized groups.

Social Cohesion: Maintaining social harmony in a multicultural society can be difficult, especially when cultural differences lead to misunderstandings or prejudices. The lack of a shared identity can result in social fragmentation, where different groups remain isolated from one another, making it harder to build a unified national community.

Discrimination and Inequality: Despite policies promoting equality, multicultural societies often experience forms of discrimination against minority groups, including racism, religious intolerance, and economic marginalization. These inequalities can undermine the goals of multiculturalism by creating social divisions and exacerbating conflict.

Political Representation: In multicultural societies, achieving fair political representation for all groups can be challenging. Minorities may feel politically underrepresented, leading to a sense of disempowerment and dissatisfaction. This lack of representation can fuel tensions, especially when policy decisions disproportionately favor the majority group.

Causes of Conflict in Multicultural Settings

Conflicts in multicultural societies can arise from various sources, often tied to differences in culture, identity, and access to resources. Below are some key causes of conflict:

Cultural Clashes: Differences in values, beliefs, and practices between cultural groups can lead to misunderstandings, prejudices, and social friction. For instance, in many multicultural societies, issues such as religious practices, dress codes, and family traditions can become points of contention. Cultural clashes often manifest in debates over public policies such as the wearing of religious symbols or the use of minority languages in public institutions.

Economic Disparity: Economic inequality is another major driver of conflict in multicultural societies. Minority groups often face higher rates of poverty, unemployment, and limited access to education and healthcare. Economic disparity can lead to resentment and a sense of injustice, particularly when wealth and resources are concentrated in the hands of the dominant group. This can result in competition for limited resources, further deepening the divide between groups.

Political Marginalization: Political marginalization occurs when minority groups are excluded from meaningful participation in the political process. This can be due to lack of representation in government, biased policies, or the dominance of a single political party or ideology. When a group feels politically disenfranchised or ignored, it can lead to resentment and may even escalate into protests or violent conflict.

Historical Grievances: Historical injustices, such as colonization, slavery, or discrimination, can leave lasting scars on multicultural societies. These grievances can perpetuate intergroup tensions and make it difficult for different cultural groups to reconcile. For example, Indigenous communities in many countries have historically faced dispossession and marginalization, which continue to affect their relationships with the broader society.

Identity and Autonomy: In multicultural societies, groups often struggle to assert their cultural identities and secure their autonomy. This struggle can result in demands for greater political control, cultural preservation, or territorial rights. When these demands are not met, it can lead to conflicts over issues like secession, autonomy, or the recognition of cultural rights.

Globalization and Migration: Globalization has led to increased migration, bringing new cultures and people into multicultural societies. While this can enrich societies, it can also lead to tensions, especially when migrants face discrimination or struggle to integrate into their new environment. The rapid influx of immigrants can also strain social services and resources, fueling resentment among native populations.

Political Science Approaches to Conflict Resolution

Theories and Models of Conflict Resolution in Political Science

Political science provides various theories and models to understand and address conflict resolution in multicultural societies. These models focus on power dynamics, governance structures, and institutional mechanisms to manage conflicts, promote peace, and ensure justice. Below are some key theories and models that shape conflict resolution in political science:

Realist Theory:
The realist theory in political science is often applied to international relations and conflict resolution. It posits that conflicts arise from the inherent nature of states or groups to compete for power and resources. In multicultural societies, realists argue that peace can be achieved only through balance of power. Conflict resolution in this context might focus on ensuring that no group becomes too dominant or disenfranchised. Realists emphasize the importance of political stability, often achieved through centralized power and a strong state.

Liberalism and Institutions:
Liberal theories of conflict resolution emphasize the role of institutions in managing conflicts. According to liberalism, conflict can be mitigated through cooperation, the establishment of democratic institutions, and the rule of law. In multicultural societies, institutions such as fair electoral systems, inclusive policy-making, and legal frameworks that guarantee minority rights are crucial for conflict resolution. The model suggests that when institutions function properly and inclusively, they can mediate disputes and ensure equal representation for all groups.

Marxist Theory:
Rooted in the works of Karl Marx, the Marxist approach to conflict resolution focuses on class struggles and economic inequalities as the primary sources of conflict. In multicultural societies, this theory highlights how economic disparities between ethnic or cultural groups can lead to tension and violence. Marxists argue that true resolution comes not only through political negotiation but by addressing the economic and social structures that perpetuate inequality. In this context, redistributive justice, land reform, and social welfare policies are central to conflict resolution.

Constructivist Approach:
Constructivism, a theory within political science, emphasizes the role of identity, culture, and social norms in shaping conflicts. This approach suggests that the perceptions and identities of different cultural groups often lead to misunderstanding and tension. Conflict resolution in a multicultural society, from a constructivist perspective, would involve dialogue and the construction of new narratives that promote shared understanding and social cohesion. Constructivists advocate for processes of cultural exchange and the development of common norms to prevent conflict.

Negotiation and Mediation Models:
Political science also looks at negotiation and mediation as primary tools for resolving conflicts. Theories of negotiation emphasize finding common ground between conflicting parties, while mediation involves the use of a neutral third party to facilitate communication between groups. In multicultural societies, where there are multiple groups with distinct identities and interests, these models are highly relevant. Successful negotiations and mediations can help reconcile political and cultural differences, promoting cooperation and peace.

Case Studies of Conflict Resolution in Multicultural Societies from a Political Science Perspective

South Africa: The End of Apartheid

One of the most significant examples of conflict resolution in a multicultural society is the peaceful transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa. The political science approach in this case emphasized negotiation, power-sharing, and the establishment of democratic institutions. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, became a key component of conflict resolution. The TRC allowed for public hearings of past atrocities, promoting national healing and reconciliation between racial and ethnic groups. The model of negotiation and power-sharing, coupled with the creation of inclusive institutions, provided the framework for South Africa's transition to democracy, illustrating how political science theories of reconciliation and institution-building can resolve deep-rooted ethnic conflicts.

Northern Ireland: The Good Friday Agreement (1998)

The conflict between the Protestant Unionists and Catholic Nationalists in Northern Ireland was a long-standing example of ethnic and religious conflict. The Good Friday Agreement, negotiated in 1998, represents a political science success story in conflict resolution. The agreement provided a framework for power-sharing, ensuring political representation for both communities. Additionally, it created institutions for governance that included mechanisms for dealing with historical grievances, such as a truth and reconciliation process. Political science models of power-sharing, trust-building, and institution-building were key to this agreement’s success in resolving conflict and promoting peace in a multicultural society.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Dayton Agreement (1995)

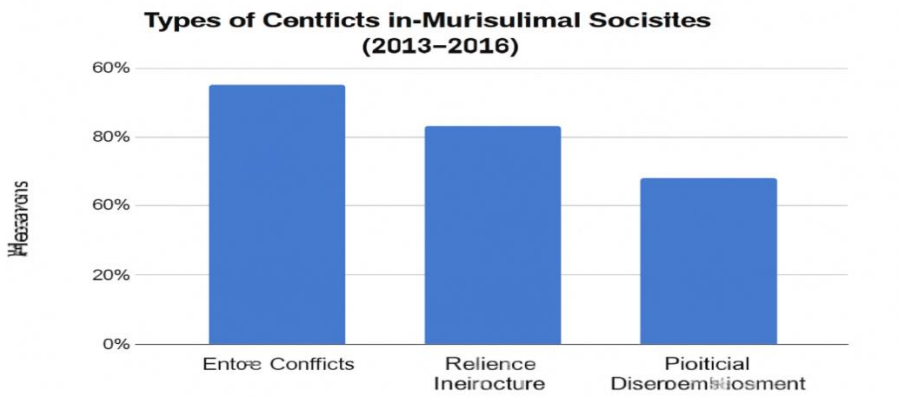
The Bosnian War in the 1990s was marked by ethnic violence among the Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs. The Dayton Agreement, brokered by the United States, was a political solution that ended the war. The agreement established a complex power-sharing arrangement, dividing the country into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. The Dayton Accords reflected a political science model of conflict resolution based on balancing power between conflicting ethnic groups, but they also highlighted the challenges of implementing such an arrangement in a deeply divided society. The Bosnian case exemplifies how political science theories of power-sharing and negotiation can work in conflict resolution, though the long-term sustainability of peace remains a challenge.

India: The Assam Accord (1985)

In India, the Assam Accord of 1985 resolved a long-standing ethnic conflict between the Assamese population and Bengali migrants in the state of Assam. The political solution involved the creation of mechanisms for resolving disputes over migration and citizenship status. It also granted special provisions for Assamese culture and language to preserve the identity of the indigenous population. The Assam Accord is a case study of political negotiation in a multicultural society, where power-sharing arrangements and cultural recognition were key to resolving the conflict. The agreement is often viewed as a model for addressing ethnic conflicts through political negotiation and ensuring representation of minority groups.

Pakistan: The Balochistan Peace Process

In Pakistan, the conflict in Balochistan, driven by demands for greater autonomy and resource control by the Baloch people, has been a source of tension for decades. The political science approach to conflict resolution in this case involves both negotiation and development strategies. The government has initiated various dialogues with Baloch nationalist groups while also investing in infrastructure development in the province. The Balochistan peace process illustrates how political and economic solutions, alongside dialogue and representation, can play crucial roles in resolving conflicts in a multicultural society.



Graph 1: Types of Conflicts in Multicultural Societies (2000-2025)

Description: A bar chart illustrating the most common types of conflicts in multicultural societies, including ethnic conflicts, religious intolerance, and political disenfranchisement. The chart highlights the prevalence of ethnic conflicts and religious intolerance as major challenges in societies like Pakistan.

Anthropological Insights into Cultural Conflicts

The Role of Cultural Identity in Shaping Conflict

Cultural identity plays a central role in shaping conflict, particularly in multicultural societies where various ethnic, religious, and social groups coexist. Anthropologists argue that cultural identity is not just about individual belonging but also encompasses the collective memory, values, traditions, and practices that define a group's existence and its relationship with others. When these identities are threatened or marginalized, conflicts can arise.

Cultural Identity as a Source of Belonging:

Cultural identity provides individuals and groups with a sense of belonging, purpose, and connection. It influences how people view themselves and their place in society. When a group's cultural identity is undermined, whether through political exclusion, cultural assimilation, or economic marginalization, it can provoke resistance and conflict. For example, the struggle for autonomy in regions like Catalonia, Tibet, and Balochistan often stems from a desire to preserve and assert cultural identity against a dominant political or cultural force.

Ethnic and Religious Tensions:
In multicultural societies, ethnic and religious identities are often at the core of conflicts. These identities are tied to historical narratives, rituals, and collective memories that can deeply influence how individuals interact with others. Anthropologists argue that conflicts often emerge when one group perceives another as a threat to its way of life. Ethnic groups may compete for political power, economic resources, or cultural recognition, leading to tensions and violence. The Bosnian War and the Rwandan Genocide are tragic examples of how ethnic identities can escalate into full-scale violence.

Competition for Cultural Space and Recognition:
The conflict can also arise from struggles over cultural space and recognition. In many cases, minority groups seek recognition of their culture, language, and heritage within the broader society. For instance, Indigenous peoples across the world have long fought to have their cultural practices and land rights acknowledged. When these groups are denied recognition or forced to assimilate, their sense of identity and belonging is compromised, often leading to cultural and political resistance.

The Intersection of Culture and Political Power:
Cultural identity is often intertwined with political power, where dominant groups seek to control the narrative of history, culture, and identity. This can lead to identity-based politics, where groups fight for cultural recognition, rights, and political autonomy. In this context, cultural conflicts can be exacerbated by political power struggles, with each group using its cultural identity as a form of resistance or assertion. The conflict in Kashmir, for instance, has strong cultural, religious, and political components, with competing identities shaping the discourse on sovereignty.

Anthropological Methods for Understanding Social Dynamics and Group Behaviors
Anthropology provides a range of tools and methods to study cultural conflicts and the social dynamics that underpin them. These methods help anthropologists understand the complexities of group behaviors, interactions, and the cultural practices that shape conflict. Below are key anthropological approaches used to understand social dynamics and conflict:

Ethnographic Fieldwork:
One of the foundational methods in anthropology is ethnography, which involves immersive, long-term fieldwork in communities to understand their cultural practices, social structures, and everyday life. Through participant observation and interviews, anthropologists gain insights into the lived experiences of individuals and groups, often uncovering the underlying cultural tensions that contribute to conflict. In the context of conflict, ethnographic research can reveal how different groups perceive one another, their collective memories, and the socio-political dynamics that fuel division.

Example: Anthropologist Clifford Geertz's ethnographic work in Indonesia revealed how political and economic inequalities were deeply intertwined with cultural practices, showing how cultural identity could fuel resistance movements against political authority.

Cultural Relativism:
Cultural relativism is an anthropological approach that advocates for understanding and interpreting a culture within its own context, without making judgments based on the standards of another culture. This method is crucial for studying conflicts in multicultural societies, as it helps researchers avoid imposing outside values and allows them to see the world through the eyes of the groups involved. By applying cultural relativism, anthropologists can identify the root causes of conflict that may arise from misunderstandings or misinterpretations between different cultural norms.

Example: In examining the role of honor and family in Middle Eastern and South Asian societies, cultural relativism allows anthropologists to understand why certain actions or rituals, such as honor killings, occur and how they are perceived by the community, instead of immediately condemning them through a Western lens.

Social Structure Analysis:
Anthropologists often focus on the social structures that govern relationships between individuals and groups within a society. These structures include family dynamics, kinship networks, class hierarchies, and gender roles, all of which can play a significant role in conflict. Understanding these structures allows anthropologists to see how social power and status influence group behaviors and attitudes toward conflict resolution.

Example: In studying conflicts between ethnic groups, anthropologists might examine how social hierarchies and class divisions impact group solidarity and cooperation. For instance, the caste system in India has been a major source of social tension and conflict due to the rigid social stratification it creates.

Discourse Analysis:
Anthropologists use discourse analysis to examine how language shapes social realities and influences conflict. By analyzing the way people speak about issues related to identity, politics, and conflict, anthropologists can uncover the narratives that justify or challenge social divisions. Discourse analysis helps to reveal how language is used to construct "us vs. them" mentalities, which often contribute to social conflicts.

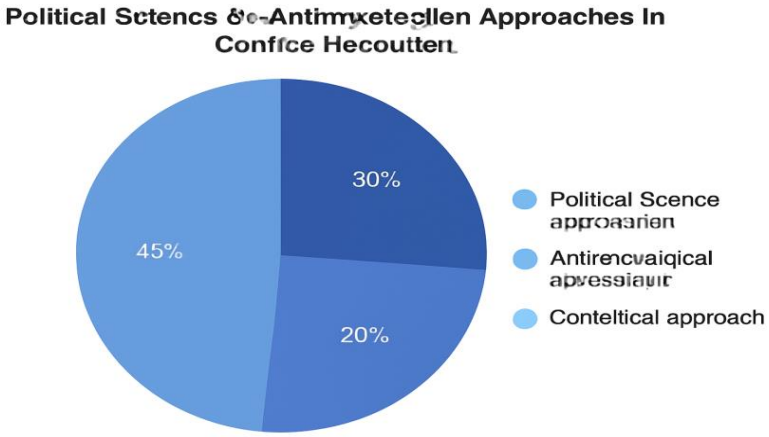
Example: In post-colonial societies, anthropologists may analyze how the language of nationalism or independence movements constructs collective identities and can be a powerful tool in either fostering unity or exacerbating division.

Comparative Analysis:
Anthropologists also use comparative methods to study conflicts across different societies. By examining how similar cultural conflicts have been resolved in various cultural contexts, they can identify patterns and strategies that might be applied to other situations. This comparative approach helps to highlight universal principles of conflict resolution while also emphasizing the importance of context-specific solutions.

Example: Comparative studies of conflict resolution between Indigenous groups in Canada and Australia have provided insights into how both groups have sought legal and cultural recognition while dealing with historical trauma and marginalization.

Structural Functionalism:
Structural functionalism, a framework within anthropology, examines how social institutions and structures work together to maintain stability within a society. When these structures are disrupted or fail to address the needs of all groups, conflict arises. This approach can be useful for understanding how societal structures such as governance, education, and legal systems contribute to social cohesion or tension in multicultural settings.

Example: Structural functionalism can explain how the failure of institutions to recognize minority group rights or provide economic opportunities can create feelings of alienation, contributing to ethnic or cultural conflict.



Graph 2: Political Science vs. Anthropological Approaches in Conflict Resolution

Description: A pie chart comparing the effectiveness of political science-based methods (e.g., governance, power sharing) versus anthropological methods (e.g., cultural understanding, community engagement) in resolving conflicts in multicultural societies. The chart demonstrates that a combined approach yields the best results.

Integrating Political Science and Anthropology for Effective Conflict Resolution

Combining Political Structures with Cultural Understanding for Comprehensive Solutions
The integration of political science and anthropology in conflict resolution offers a holistic approach to understanding and addressing conflicts in multicultural societies. Political science focuses on governance structures, political institutions, and power dynamics, while anthropology provides insights into cultural identity, social practices, and group behaviors. When combined, these two disciplines offer a more comprehensive framework for addressing conflicts that arise not just from political inequality but also from cultural misunderstanding and social fragmentation.

Anthropology's Contribution to Conflict Resolution:
Anthropology, on the other hand, provides valuable insights into the cultural dynamics that drive conflicts. It emphasizes understanding how cultural identity, traditions, and values shape group behavior and social interactions. Anthropologists argue that conflicts are often not just about political power but also about cultural recognition, the preservation of identities, and the right to self-determination. By understanding the historical and social context of cultural groups, anthropologists can guide policymakers in crafting solutions that are sensitive to cultural nuances and foster social integration. Anthropological methods, such as ethnographic research and cultural analysis, help identify the root causes of social tensions and suggest culturally appropriate solutions.

Combining Political Structures and Cultural Understanding:
When political structures are designed with cultural understanding at their core, they are more likely to be successful in resolving conflicts. For example, political institutions should not only ensure equitable distribution of resources and power but also respect the cultural identities and practices of all groups. This can be achieved through the inclusion of cultural representatives in political decision-making, the protection of cultural rights, and the recognition of diverse identities within the legal framework.

Furthermore, political leaders and policymakers should be trained to understand the social and cultural dynamics that underpin conflicts. By recognizing the importance of identity in conflict, political science can collaborate with anthropology to create policies that are not only politically fair but also culturally sensitive. This integrated approach can lead to more inclusive governance and sustainable peace in multicultural societies.

Case Study from Pakistan: Analyzing the Role of Political Governance and Cultural Understanding in Resolving Ethnic Conflicts
Pakistan provides a compelling case study of how integrating political science and anthropology can help resolve ethnic conflicts. The country is home to diverse ethnic groups, including Punjabis, Pashtuns, Sindhis, Baloch, and Muhajirs (immigrants from India after partition), each with its own distinct cultural identity and historical grievances. Over the decades, Pakistan has faced several ethnic conflicts, many of which have been exacerbated by political marginalization, economic disparity, and cultural misunderstandings.

The Balochistan Conflict:
The Balochistan region in Pakistan has been a site of ongoing ethnic conflict for several decades. The Baloch people, who constitute a significant ethnic minority in the country, have long complained about political marginalization, economic underdevelopment, and the exploitation of the region's natural resources. These grievances have led to armed resistance against the central government, with Baloch nationalist groups demanding greater autonomy and control over their resources.

From a political science perspective, the central government has attempted to address the issue through policies of federalism and regional autonomy, such as the 18th Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan (2010), which gave more powers to the provinces. However, political

solutions alone have not been sufficient to resolve the conflict, as they failed to account for the deep cultural and historical factors driving Baloch demands.

The Muhajir Identity Conflict in Karachi:
Another example of ethnic conflict in Pakistan is the issue of Muhajirs (immigrants from India during the Partition of India in 1947) in Karachi. Over the years, the Muhajir community has felt politically excluded, despite being one of the largest urban groups in Pakistan. Their sense of identity and belonging has been linked to their migration history, and the Muhajir population has frequently clashed with native Sindhis over resource allocation and political representation. The Muhajir community formed the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) to represent their interests in the political sphere, which led to tensions and violent clashes with other ethnic groups in Karachi.

Political science models focusing on power-sharing and democratic representation have been used to attempt to address these conflicts, including the creation of urban governance mechanisms that give Muhajirs and other ethnic groups a fair share of political power. However, anthropological insights suggest that the issue is also rooted in a sense of cultural alienation. The Muhajir community's identity as migrants, and their struggle for social integration in Karachi, is central to understanding the tensions. The political solution, therefore, needs to address not only political representation but also the integration of Muhajir cultural practices and historical narratives into Karachi's identity.

The Role of Cultural Understanding in Political Reconciliation:
The experience of ethnic conflict in Balochistan and Karachi shows that effective conflict resolution requires both political structures that ensure fair governance and the cultural understanding of group identities. In Balochistan, recognizing the Baloch's cultural identity in educational curricula, media representation, and political discourse has been a critical step toward reducing tensions. In Karachi, political negotiations that include cultural recognition of the Muhajir community's migration history, traditions, and needs have been key to resolving inter-group conflict.

Integrating Political Science and Anthropology:
Pakistan's experience with ethnic conflict highlights the need for an integrated approach to conflict resolution. Political institutions must not only manage power and resources equitably but also foster cultural inclusivity by recognizing and respecting the diverse identities that make up the country. For example, creating spaces for dialogue where ethnic communities can share their cultural histories, address grievances, and negotiate their place within the national fabric can help bridge divides. Similarly, incorporating cultural awareness training into political leadership programs can enhance the capacity of leaders to understand and navigate the complexities of multicultural societies.

Idrees (2024) examines the transformation of Punjab's "Model Bazaars" initiative into the statutory entity known as the Punjab Sahulat Bazaars Authority (PSBA). The study highlights how under visionary leadership, the PSBA achieved up to 35 % price relief on essential goods through innovations such as free home-deliveries (85,000 orders), inclusivity measures (female-

managed vendor stalls and mobile bazaars for remote areas), and transparent supply-chain practices. These findings illustrate how a citizen-centred, digitally enabled welfare governance model can challenge traditional subsidy-based mechanisms in emerging economies.

Ahmad (2025) examines the operational and financial challenges of eight major Pakistani State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), including PIA, Pakistan Steel Mills, and Pakistan Railways, over the period 2019–2024. The study highlights chronic losses, inefficiency, high subsidy dependence—with PIA and PSM consuming over 92% of total subsidies—and structural weaknesses exacerbated by political interference. Using theoretical frameworks such as agency theory, institutional theory, public value, behavioral economics, and political economy, Ahmad underscores the urgent need for reforms, including privatization, public-private partnerships, governance professionalization, and citizen-focused accountability to restore public trust and ensure sustainable public sector management.

Ahmad (2025) investigates human–AI collaboration in professional knowledge work, exploring its impact on productivity, error patterns, and ethical risks. The findings show that AI-assisted tasks can improve efficiency by 32–39%, particularly for novices performing structured tasks, while complex tasks experience a 15–25% increase in errors. Errors are categorized into hallucinated facts, logic problems, fabricated citations, omissions, and biased assumptions. Ahmad emphasizes the importance of human oversight, verification behaviors, and ethical awareness, providing actionable strategies to integrate AI into workflows while balancing speed, accuracy, and accountability.

Summary:

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of conflict resolution in multicultural societies by integrating the perspectives of political science and anthropology. By examining the causes of conflict and the role of cultural dynamics, the paper argues that effective conflict resolution must address both political structures and cultural narratives. The article also explores case studies from Pakistan, offering insights into how integrating political governance with cultural understanding can lead to more sustainable and inclusive conflict resolution strategies.

The article concludes by proposing a new framework for conflict resolution that combines political science's focus on governance and policy with anthropology’s emphasis on cultural empathy and social dynamics. This integrated approach holds promise for resolving conflicts in multicultural societies by fostering both political stability and social harmony.

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