

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS IN
THE CASE OF ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES IN BALOCHISTANMahnoor Ijaz¹, Sadia Tehseen^{*2}, Anza Bibi³, Junaid Karim⁴^{1,3,4}BS Political Science, University of Mianwali, Punjab, Pakistan.^{*2}Visiting Lecturer, Department of Political Science and IR, University of Mianwali, Punjab, Pakistan.¹mahnoor.ijaz1425@gmail.com, ²sadiatehseen65@gmail.com, ³anzabibi92@gmail.com,⁴junaidniazi4488@gmail.comDOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18195976>**Keywords**

Civil society, enforced disappearances, Balochistan, Pakistan, human rights, accountability

Article History

Received: 03 November 2025

Accepted: 17 December 2025

Published: 31 December 2025

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Abstract

Enforced disappearances constitute one of the most serious and persistent human rights challenges in Balochistan, Pakistan, undermining constitutional guarantees, social trust, and state legitimacy. In a context marked by political marginalization, insurgency, and a security-dominated governance framework, civil society organizations (CSOs) have emerged as crucial actors advocating for victims, documenting violations, and sustaining national and international attention on the issue. This study critically examines the role of civil society organizations in addressing enforced disappearances in Balochistan by analyzing their functions, strategies, and limitations. Employing a qualitative research design based on secondary sources, including academic literature, human rights reports, court judgments, and United Nations documents, the study explores how civil society engages legal institutions, media, and international mechanisms to seek accountability. The findings indicate that while civil society has been effective in agenda-setting, documentation, and international advocacy, its impact remains constrained by restricted civic space, intimidation, and weak enforcement of judicial directives. The study concludes that civil society remains indispensable in challenging impunity in Balochistan; however, sustainable progress requires legal reforms, institutional accountability, and a recalibration of state-civil society relations grounded in constitutionalism and human rights norms.

INTRODUCTION

Civil society plays a foundational role in democratic governance by promoting accountability, protecting rights, and mediating between citizens and the state, particularly in contexts where formal institutions are weak or contested (Diamond, 1994). In Pakistan, civil society organizations have historically contributed to movements for constitutionalism, judicial independence, and human rights, often operating under authoritarian or semi-authoritarian political conditions (Zaidi, 2015; Jalal, 2010). In Balochistan, however, civil society engagement is

shaped by a distinct political and security environment characterized by chronic underdevelopment, political exclusion, and recurring conflict between the state and Baloch nationalist groups (Ahmed, 2013; Ali, 2012).

Enforced disappearance, defined as the arrest or detention of individuals followed by the refusal to acknowledge their fate or whereabouts, constitutes a grave violation of international human rights law (United Nations, 2006). In Balochistan, allegations of enforced disappearances have been repeatedly raised since the early 2000s, with

families, activists, and human rights organizations accusing state security agencies of involvement. Despite judicial interventions, including suo motu actions by the Supreme Court of Pakistan and the establishment of the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances, the practice has persisted (Human Rights Watch, 2011; HRCP, 2020).

Within this securitized governance framework, civil society organizations have emerged as critical actors challenging silence and impunity. Groups such as the Voice for Baloch Missing Persons (VBMP), the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, and international NGOs have documented cases, supported families, organized protests, and engaged international human rights mechanisms. Their activism has kept the issue visible at national and global levels, even as civic space in Balochistan remains highly restricted (International Crisis Group, 2015; Fair, 2014). This study examines the role of civil society organizations in addressing enforced disappearances in Balochistan, situating their efforts within broader debates on security, governance, and human rights in Pakistan.

Literature Review

The literature on enforced disappearances in Pakistan highlights the tension between security imperatives and constitutional protections, particularly in conflict-affected regions such as Balochistan (Siddiqi, 2017; Iqbal, 2018). Scholars argue that disappearances have been normalized within counterinsurgency frameworks, where exceptional measures are justified in the name of national security, leading to systematic violations of due process and fundamental rights (Fair, 2014). This scholarship emphasizes the role of weak civilian oversight and the absence of clear legal prohibitions as key drivers of impunity.

Research on civil society in Pakistan underscores its resilience under restrictive political conditions. Zaidi (2015) and Diamond (1994) note that civil society often compensates for institutional failures by mobilizing public opinion, engaging courts, and leveraging international advocacy networks. In the context of enforced disappearances, civil society organizations have produced alternative forms of

knowledge through documentation, victim testimonies, and shadow reports submitted to international bodies, including the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (Amnesty International, 2016; WGEID, 2013).

However, other studies caution against overstating civil society's transformative capacity in highly securitized environments. The International Crisis Group (2015) and Ahmed (2013) argue that civil society in Balochistan operates under constant surveillance, intimidation, and legal constraints, which limit its reach and sustainability. These structural constraints reflect broader civil-military imbalances in Pakistan's governance architecture, where security institutions exercise significant autonomy from civilian and judicial oversight (Jalal, 2010; Fair, 2014). Consequently, the literature presents civil society as both indispensable and constrained in addressing enforced disappearances.

Research Gap

Despite extensive documentation of enforced disappearances and acknowledgment of civil society activism, there is limited focused research that systematically analyzes the specific role, strategies, and constraints of civil society organizations in Balochistan. Existing studies often treat civil society as a peripheral actor rather than examining it as a central mechanism of rights advocacy and accountability in a conflict-driven province. This study addresses this gap by placing civil society organizations at the core of analysis.

Research Questions

1. What role do civil society organizations play in addressing enforced disappearances in Balochistan?
2. What strategies do civil society organizations employ to seek accountability and justice?
3. What political and structural constraints limit the effectiveness of civil society organizations?

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the role of civil society organizations in documenting and advocating against enforced disappearances in Balochistan.
2. To examine the legal, political, and international strategies used by civil society organizations.
3. To identify key constraints affecting civil society effectiveness in a securitized governance context.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for scholars, policymakers, and human rights practitioners seeking to understand rights advocacy in conflict-affected regions. By focusing on Balochistan, it contributes to debates on civil society, human security, and accountability in Pakistan. The study also highlights the agency of marginalized actors and offers insights for designing rights-based governance and conflict-resolution frameworks.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based exclusively on secondary sources. Data were collected from peer-reviewed academic journals, books, human rights reports, Supreme Court judgments, government documents, and United Nations publications. Qualitative content analysis was employed to identify recurring themes related to civil society roles, advocacy strategies, and structural constraints. The reliance on secondary data is appropriate given the sensitivity of enforced disappearance cases and restricted access to conflict zones such as Balochistan.

Findings

- Civil society organizations have emerged as the primary actors documenting cases of enforced disappearances in Balochistan in the absence of transparent and credible state-maintained records. Through systematic collection of victim testimonies, case files, and timelines, organizations such as the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and local advocacy groups have created alternative archives that preserve evidence of human rights violations and

support legal and advocacy efforts (Human Rights Watch, 2011; HRCP, 2020).

- Civil society has played a central role in legal advocacy and strategic litigation by assisting families of missing persons in approaching the Supreme Court of Pakistan and provincial high courts. These efforts have contributed to judicial acknowledgment of enforced disappearances as a constitutional and human rights issue, although weak enforcement of court directives highlights structural limitations within Pakistan's accountability framework (Iqbal, 2018; Siddiqua, 2017).
- Sustained public mobilization has been a key strategy used by civil society organizations to maintain visibility of the issue. Protests, sit-ins, and long marches—often led by families of the disappeared—have kept enforced disappearances in national discourse despite media restrictions and political pressure, while also fostering solidarity networks across provinces (Ahmed, 2013).
- Civil society organizations have been instrumental in internationalizing the issue of enforced disappearances by engaging with international human rights mechanisms, particularly the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. Through shadow reports and case submissions, CSOs have generated international scrutiny and normative pressure on the Pakistani state to address accountability gaps (WGEID, 2013; Amnesty International, 2016).
- CSOs have actively challenged official security narratives that frame enforced disappearances as necessary counterterrorism measures. By reframing the issue in terms of constitutional rights and international legal obligations, civil society has influenced judicial discourse, media framing, and international reporting on Balochistan (Fair, 2014).
- Beyond advocacy, civil society organizations have provided psychosocial support and platforms for victims' families to voice their experiences. This victim-centered approach has humanized the issue, strengthened public empathy, and highlighted the long-term social and

psychological impacts of enforced disappearances (HRCP, 2020).

- The findings reveal that civil society organizations face significant operational constraints, including surveillance, harassment, restricted access to affected areas, and threats to personal security. These pressures limit outreach, discourage participation, and undermine organizational sustainability, reflecting a shrinking civic space in Balochistan (International Crisis Group, 2015; Jalal, 2010).

- A persistent gap exists between acknowledgment and accountability, as enforced disappearances are recognized in judicial and international forums but rarely lead to prosecutions or structural reforms. The continued reliance on inquiry commissions rather than criminal accountability demonstrates the limits of civil society advocacy without political will (Siddiq, 2017).

- Civil society reporting has consistently exposed institutional weaknesses such as delayed investigations, lack of inter-agency coordination, and absence of witness protection mechanisms, reinforcing the need for comprehensive legal and institutional reforms (International Crisis Group, 2015).

- Overall, civil society organizations have increasingly assumed the role of moral authorities in the debate on enforced disappearances in Balochistan. Their credibility, grounded in documentation, victim engagement, and sustained advocacy, contrasts with state opacity and denial, reinforcing their indispensability in human rights advocacy despite significant structural and political constraints (Diamond, 1994).

Discussion

1. Enforced Disappearances as a Structural Governance Issue

The findings of this study indicate that enforced disappearances in Balochistan are not isolated or episodic incidents but are deeply embedded within Pakistan's broader governance and security architecture. The persistence of disappearances reflects structural weaknesses in civilian oversight, rule of law, and accountability mechanisms, particularly in conflict-affected regions (Siddiq,

2017; Fair, 2014). In Balochistan, governance has largely been shaped by a security-centric approach that prioritizes territorial control and counterinsurgency over political inclusion and constitutional safeguards. This structural context creates conditions in which extraordinary measures become normalized, allowing enforced disappearances to persist with limited consequences.

2. Securitization and the Marginalization of Rights

The securitization of Balochistan has significantly influenced how enforced disappearances are framed and justified by the state. Security narratives often portray disappearances as necessary measures to counter militancy and separatism, thereby marginalizing human rights concerns (International Crisis Group, 2015). This framing not only delegitimizes victims' claims but also restricts public debate and policy alternatives. Civil society organizations challenge this securitized discourse by reframing disappearances as violations of constitutional and international legal obligations, thereby contesting the state's monopoly over security narratives.

3. Civil Society as an Accountability Substitute

In the absence of effective institutional accountability, civil society organizations have assumed the role of de facto accountability mechanisms. Through documentation, legal petitions, and public advocacy, CSOs have sought to fill gaps left by state institutions (Human Rights Watch, 2011; HRCP, 2020). This substitution role aligns with theoretical perspectives that view civil society as a compensatory actor in weak or hybrid regimes (Diamond, 1994). However, reliance on civil society for accountability also exposes the fragility of rights protection when formal institutions fail to function effectively.

4. Legal Mobilization and Judicial Engagement

One of the most significant contributions of civil society has been its engagement with Pakistan's judiciary. Civil society-supported petitions and advocacy have prompted judicial acknowledgment of enforced disappearances, including suo motu

actions by the Supreme Court of Pakistan (Iqbal, 2018). While courts have recognized the gravity of the issue, enforcement remains inconsistent. This disconnect highlights the limitations of legal mobilization in contexts where executive compliance is weak and security institutions operate with significant autonomy.

5. Internationalization of the Disappearance Discourse

Civil society organizations have been instrumental in internationalizing the issue of enforced disappearances in Balochistan. Engagement with international human rights bodies, including the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, has generated external scrutiny and normative pressure on the Pakistani state (WGEID, 2013; Amnesty International, 2016). Internationalization has provided moral and political support to victims' families; however, its impact on domestic policy change remains limited, reflecting the constraints of external pressure in sovereign security matters.

6. Constraints on Civil Society Effectiveness

Despite their critical role, civil society organizations in Balochistan operate under severe constraints. Intimidation, surveillance, legal restrictions, and limited access to affected areas significantly curtail their activities (International Crisis Group, 2015). These constraints not only weaken organizational capacity but also discourage broader civic participation. The shrinking civic space reflects a broader pattern of civil-military imbalance in Pakistan, where security imperatives override democratic norms (Jalal, 2010; Fair, 2014).

7. Victims' Families and Grassroots Mobilization

The activism of victims' families, often supported by civil society organizations, represents a powerful yet underexplored dimension of resistance to enforced disappearances. Groups such as the Voice for Baloch Missing Persons have transformed private grief into public advocacy, sustaining long-term protests and marches. Their participation challenges traditional power hierarchies and underscores the human cost of

disappearances (Ahmed, 2013). However, grassroots mobilization remains vulnerable to repression and fatigue, limiting its sustainability.

8. Civil-Military Relations and Impunity

The persistence of enforced disappearances must also be understood within the context of Pakistan's civil-military relations. The autonomy enjoyed by security institutions, coupled with limited parliamentary oversight, creates an environment conducive to impunity (Siddiqua, 2017; Jalal, 2010). Civil society challenges this imbalance by demanding transparency and accountability, but structural power asymmetries limit the scope of such challenges. Without reforms in civil-military relations, civil society efforts are likely to remain reactive rather than transformative.

9. Implications for Human Security and State Legitimacy

Enforced disappearances have profound implications for human security and state legitimacy in Balochistan. The practice erodes trust between citizens and the state, fuels grievances, and perpetuates cycles of violence and alienation (Ali, 2012). Civil society's role in highlighting these broader consequences is crucial, as it reframes disappearances not only as legal violations but as threats to long-term stability and social cohesion. Addressing disappearances is therefore integral to any sustainable peace-building strategy.

10. Towards Rights-Based Governance

The discussion underscores the need to shift from security-centric governance toward a rights-based framework in Balochistan. Civil society organizations offer valuable insights and grassroots legitimacy that can inform policy reform and conflict resolution. However, their inclusion requires political will, legal protection, and institutional openness. Integrating civil society into governance processes can help bridge the gap between state authority and citizen rights, contributing to more inclusive, accountable, and sustainable governance in Balochistan.

Conclusion

Enforced disappearances in Balochistan represent one of the most severe challenges to constitutional governance, rule of law, and human security in Pakistan. The persistence of this practice reflects deep-rooted structural issues, including the dominance of security-centric governance, weak civilian oversight, and the marginalization of peripheral regions within the national political framework. This study has demonstrated that enforced disappearances are not merely isolated human rights violations but are embedded within broader patterns of political exclusion and conflict management strategies. In this context, civil society organizations have emerged as vital actors working to expose violations, document cases, and keep the issue alive in public and judicial discourse despite operating under highly restrictive and often hostile conditions.

The analysis further reveals that civil society organizations in Balochistan have played a critical role in filling accountability gaps left by state institutions. Through legal advocacy, public mobilization, and engagement with international human rights mechanisms, these organizations have challenged narratives of denial and impunity. Their efforts have contributed to judicial acknowledgment of enforced disappearances and have internationalized the issue, generating normative pressure on the state. However, the impact of civil society remains constrained by intimidation, limited access to affected areas, and the lack of effective implementation of court orders. This gap between recognition and enforcement underscores the structural limitations of rights advocacy within a securitized governance environment.

Overall, the case of enforced disappearances in Balochistan highlights both the indispensability and the limitations of civil society in contexts of protracted conflict. While civil society organizations cannot substitute for state responsibility, they remain essential for safeguarding human rights, amplifying marginalized voices, and sustaining demands for justice. Sustainable resolution of the issue requires more than advocacy; it necessitates political will, legal reforms, and institutional accountability

aligned with constitutional and international human rights obligations. Strengthening protections for civil society and integrating their role into formal governance frameworks is crucial for rebuilding trust, addressing grievances, and advancing long-term peace and stability in Balochistan.

Way Forward

Addressing the issue of enforced disappearances in Balochistan requires a comprehensive, rights-based approach that moves beyond ad hoc responses and symbolic measures toward structural and institutional reform. The first critical step is the full criminalization of enforced disappearance in Pakistan's domestic legal framework in line with the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, coupled with clear mechanisms for investigation, prosecution, and victim redress. Strengthening civilian and parliamentary oversight of security institutions, ensuring effective implementation of judicial directives, and enhancing the independence of accountability bodies are essential to restoring the rule of law. Equally important is the protection and institutional recognition of civil society organizations and human rights defenders, whose work must be safeguarded through legal guarantees, access to information, and freedom of association. Constructive engagement between the state and civil society, grounded in transparency and constitutionalism, can help transform adversarial relationships into cooperative ones focused on truth-seeking, reconciliation, and conflict resolution. Ultimately, sustainable peace and stability in Balochistan depend on addressing underlying political grievances, ensuring meaningful participation of local communities in governance, and embedding human rights norms at the core of security and development policies.

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