



Political Interference in Performance of Police: An Exploratory Study of District Kohat

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study investigates the effect of political interference on the performance and autonomy of police personnel within a selected district Kohat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Drawing on qualitative interviews, the study highlights how the political actors influence the police's independence in making decisions, enabling political players to abuse police power for their own political and personal benefit. Police lose their professionalism when they become involved in political matters, which have a negative impact on their capacity to effectively and fairly enforce the law. Moreover, Public confidence in the police is damaged by this political interference, which not only impairs their performance but also skews their judgment. The study also draws attention to the wider ramifications of this occurrence, such as the rising crime and corruption rates in the area. This qualitative study explores the experiences of twelve SHOs in police stations, district Kohat, who are currently serving at police stations by using semi structured interviews with the purposive sampling to better understand the nature of political interference and the lived experiences of respondents within their departments. The findings of the study contribute that political interference is driven by the political and personal gain which effect merit based decision and integrity of police. Officers are exposed to hazards and dangers because to the complexity created by cultural dynamics and public contacts. Disobeying such interference frequently has terrible consequences, highlighting the necessity of reforms to guarantee fair and efficient police.

Keywords: Political Interference, Police Performance, Erosion, Public Trust, Personal, Professional Benefits.

Introduction

Policing is a pillar of justice and public security in any country. In Pakistan, the police department is confronted with serious structural, operational, and political issues that undermine its capacity to serve the people effectively. Repeated charges of corruption, inefficiency, and a lack of accountability have immensely tainted the public perception of law enforcement despite its constitutional role of preventing crime and establishing justice. Most citizens view police officers as closer to personal or political interests than values of objectivity and justice (Bangash et al., 2021). Such a perception is also supported by systemic shortfalls like poor salaries, inadequate resources, and extensive political meddling, all of which undermine morale and affect performance.

In most developing democracies, such as Pakistan, the nexus between politics and policing erodes institutional autonomy and the fair application of the law. Police organizations are regularly exposed to informal and formal political pressures that influence operational choices, resource allocation, personnel assignments, and the pursuit or suppression of specific investigations (Matakalatse & Motsepe, 2025).

Since police officers are redeployed based on loyalty instead of merit, law enforcement's probity is questioned. This undermines internal accountability and diminishes public trust, a foundation for effective police forces

(Hassan, 2025). The Kohat District is a microcosm of larger national trends; the research seeks to evaluate the impact of political interference on police performance at the district level, utilizing SHOs as the unit of analysis. Knowing these dynamics will help to gauge the larger implications for justice, the rule of law, and institutional governance in Pakistan.

This research is of considerable importance since it attempts to explore a chronic and systemic problem in Pakistani governance: political intervention in police operations. By investigating how political pressures from outside influence police performance in District Kohat, the research provides empirical richness to an understudied yet essential field of public administration and criminal justice.

The research will better explain the degree to which political agents shape police actions, modify investigation priorities, and erode internal accountability mechanisms. Earlier research (Boivin & Melo, 2023; Zaheer et al., 2020) has established that political interference not only warps operational priorities but can further result in greater criminality, bad police-community relations, and eroded public trust in the justice system.

Additionally, this research adds to the debate regarding police legitimacy in Pakistan. As Hassan (2025) points out, public confidence in the police is primarily influenced by experiences of fairness and effectiveness. Where political meddling is widespread, these two pillars are destabilized. Knowing how localized these pressures are in Kohat can help inform more extensive police reforms and institutional accountability processes. Lastly, the research has practical implications for policymakers, police leadership, and civil society stakeholders who promote depoliticized and community-based policing.

While the volume of research on police reform, accountability, and institutional integrity in Pakistan is expanding, political meddling in policing continues to be a little-examined terrain, especially at the district level. Although several national and global studies have pointed out how political influence compromises law enforcement autonomy and efficacy (Matakalatse & Motsepe, 2025; Dawson, 2017; Smith, 2018), empirical research that addresses explicitly localized experiences in areas such as District Kohat is lacking. Most available research generalizes the problem at the national or provincial level or draws on theoretical frameworks without direct interaction with frontline police officers, including Station House Officers (SHOs), who tend to receive political pressure.

Despite several reform attempts, political meddling and a lack of strong accountability systems remain hindrances to progress. Analysis indicates that police reforms within Pakistan tend not to be independent but are undermined by political players who want to keep control over the police for political gain (Jones & Patel, 2020; Gupta & Kumar, 2019). This undermines core democratic principles like openness, equality before the law, and justice (Smith, 2018).

To solve these problems, reforms beyond the surface are required. Deep-seated reforms for profound legal and institutional matters are required to ensure police autonomy, make merit-based selection and promotion possible, and enforce independent control. Lessons from international experiences indicate that community policing, body-worn cameras, and robust civil society participation can increase police legitimacy and build public trust (Tyler, 2004; Ariel et al., 2016; Caro, 2011).

Against this background, this study investigates the degree and effect of political interference in police performance in

District Kohat. This study elucidates the governance deficiencies inside Pakistan's law and order system by examining the effects of political influence, a better understanding of accountability and public trust. The objectives of our study were to explore the nature of political interference in police departments and to explore the experiences of police officers regarding political pressure within their department. The research questions of our study were as follows:

1. *How do police officers respond to political pressure within their duty hours?*
2. *How do political parties provide personal benefits to police officers?*
3. *How does political interference influence police responses to public protests?*

Literature review

In developing nations like Pakistan, political interference in police is a significant problem that prevents law enforcement agencies from doing their jobs effectively. Academics have repeatedly pointed out how political meddling hurts police independence, transparency, and service quality (Bayley & Perito, 2011).

Political interference is unauthorized influence by political elites or elected officials on police operations such as recruitment, transfers, promotion, and even investigation procedures. Hussain and Mohammad (2021) argue that political interference is usually motivated by patron-client relations, whereby political leaders want to influence police actions in pursuit of their self-interest and compromise the rule of law.

The officers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), which includes Kohat, are subject to frequent political intervention in posting and promotion, which leads to demoralization and a compromised chain of command, according to a recent research by Khan et al. (2023). Trust in organizations and their abilities are weakened when a reward system is not in place.

Pakistan's police reforms, especially the Police Order 2002, were intended to shield police from political interference by creating Public Safety Commissions. Though the reforms have been unevenly applied, political appointments remain widespread (International Crisis Group, 2016). According to Ahmed and Abbas (2022), persistent political intervention is caused by weak internal accountability mechanisms and the inadequacy of institutional balances.

A study by Pino and Wiatrowski (2006) concluded that community policing initiatives with the active participation of local groups can enhance law enforcement-citizen trust and cooperation. By promoting a feeling of mutual responsibility for public safety, these initiatives can reduce the influence of 36 political actors on police activities. Politicians find it harder to shape police activity in their own or their parties' interests when communities are engaged in policing strategies (Pino & Wiatrowski, 2006). The other key component of civil society that resists police politicization is the independent media. Exposing and reporting cases of police corruption and political intrusion enables media organizations to inform the public and promote transparency.

Despite the increasing literature on political interference in policing in South Asia and Pakistan, some significant gaps remain, especially in localized, district-level studies. The majority of the current studies (e.g., Bayley & Perito, 2011; Zaman & Lodhi, 2020) provide general national or provincial-level pictures, addressing system-level issues and top-down reforms, without providing micro-level empirical evidence of how political interference is exercised in certain districts like Kohat. In addition, Khan et al. (2023) examine the overall issues confronting the police in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), there is a lack of qualitative and exploratory research that examines the lived experiences of police officers navigating political pressures in culturally distinct areas like Kohat. Tribe affinity, religious conservatism, and covert power

structures dominate the district's special sociopolitical environment, which remains under examined in the existing literature. Police officers' informal networks, adaptational strategies, and survival tactics to cope with or evade political penetration have not been highlighted much. This research addresses these gaps by conducting an exploratory, qualitative inquiry into the character, types, and effects of political interference on police performance in District Kohat. Thus, it will contribute to original knowledge in the field of policing and governance in Pakistan.

Material & Methods

This research applied a qualitative research design in methodological traditions that aim to comprehend social phenomena from the viewpoint of individuals living them. A research design is a structural plan that directs the systematic inquiry and makes it easier to attain research goals. As Creswell (2014) puts it, qualitative research is marked by emergent design and the ability to study intricate phenomena in-depth through interviews, observation, and document analysis. The emergent design was suitable for studying the socio-political factors shaping policing in Kohat as it presents a contextual and interpretive focus relevant to the investigation.

The study utilized a phenomenological method to explore and interpret people's everyday life experiences to capture the essence of given phenomena (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology is particularly appropriate for revealing the subjective participant experiences within the context of social and institutional situations. As Auerbach (2007) implies, qualitative research provides an excellent framework to examine the meaning people attribute to their experiences. Through this strategy, the research extensively explored the perception and experience of political interference by station house officers (SHOs) in their work environment. A semi-structured interview schedule was the main instrument used in this study to get detailed tales from the respondents. Using the right instruments is crucial for collecting meaningful data in qualitative investigations, according to Arikunto (2010) and Creswell (2014).

The research utilized purposive sampling, a method where subjects are chosen purposively according to their applicability to the research issue (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). This strategy guaranteed that the people selected Station House Officers had the required information and experience to give in-depth answers to the question of political interference. A sample size of 12 participants, who were all acting as SHOs at different police stations in Kohat District, were interviewed. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest small targeted samples in qualitative research to enable in-depth scrutiny of views among participants. These SHOs were chosen based on leadership positions and direct interaction with the public and institutional settings, placing them in the best position to offer insights about the external factors influencing police performance (Walker & Katz, 2013).

The unit of analysis for this study was individual Station House Officers belonging to the Kohat police force. SHOs are pivotal in community engagement and day-to-day operations leadership, placing them at the centre of internal administrative processes and external societal forces. Their everyday interaction with political actors and the public grants them a distinctive and beneficial view of how political interference affects the effectiveness of law enforcement (Reiner, 2010; Tankebe & Liebling, 2013; Abbas, 2020; Khan, 2018).

A popular and flexible method for discovering, interpreting, and reporting patterns (themes) in qualitative data, thematic analysis was used to examine the gathered data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data preparation, coding, analysis, and presentation were all part of the process. The research was conducted by ethical standards that ensure honesty, openness, and protection of participants' rights (Resnik, 2021). There are established ethical standards to

protect the privacy and well-being of study participants while also maintaining public confidence (Sieber, 2016). The research also prioritized informed consent to the extent that the participants were adequately informed about the purpose of the study, their involvement, and the risks involved in participation (Diener & Crandall, 2020).

Data Analysis

Systemic Political Interference as an Institutional Norm

Political interference within the Kohat police department is not an isolated occurrence but rather an embedded feature of its operational structure. Political actors, primarily local and national politicians, continuously exert pressure on the police to prioritize cases involving their political allies or to dismiss certain investigations altogether. One respondent noted, *"Political leaders issue orders or 'requests' on a daily basis, particularly when they include people with powerful political ties."* This remark highlights the routine nature of such interference, underscoring that it has become a normalized part of police operations.

Officers expressed that this pressure is not a mere occasional occurrence but rather a constant presence. For example, another interviewee commented, *"We frequently have to choose between being professional and obeying directions."* This indicates that political influence operates almost daily, compelling officers to navigate a moral and professional dilemma in their interactions with political figures. The implication here is that the police are caught between their duty to uphold the law and the necessity of complying with the demands of political leaders, who hold the power to shape career trajectories within the department.

Furthermore, the institutionalization of political interference is so entrenched that it creates a climate of fear and conformity among officers. One respondent stated, *"Some officers believe that failure to comply could result in their transfer or other career-related repercussions."* This reveals how political pressure not only influences the immediate handling of cases but also extends to the professional futures of police officers. It suggests a hierarchical environment where lower-ranking officers are incentivized or coerced into compliance through threats of retaliation, including transfers or demotions.

As political interference becomes more ingrained in everyday police work, it also fosters a culture of silence and compliance. Respondents repeatedly referred to their reluctance to speak out against political pressures, often framing these pressures as inescapable. One officer described, *"You have to realize that our priorities are different,"* referring to a direct conversation with a superior about following political directives. This quote underscores the discrepancy between the officers' professional commitment to justice and the political realities they must navigate. The tension between personal integrity and professional survival becomes a recurring theme, highlighting the structural forces that reinforce the dominance of political power over legal authority.

Such a pervasive environment of political control also breeds a sense of ineffectiveness and frustration among the officers. They feel that their professional judgment is continually compromised by political agendas. One officer commented, *"When political meddling is so pervasive, it is quite difficult to function as a SHO successfully."* This sentiment is echoed in the reflections of other officers who described how political pressure dictates their every move, often overshadowing legal and procedural considerations. The emphasis on maintaining political favor becomes so central to their daily duties that many officers view their work as primarily serving the interests of political elites, rather than the law or public justice.

The normalization of political interference also contributes to an erosion of the police force's credibility within the community. As one officer remarked, *"Public trust is indeed an issue... people believe that rather than acting as a neutral force for the politicians, we are just their arm."* This statement

highlights the crisis of legitimacy facing the Kohat police force. When citizens perceive law enforcement as an extension of political will rather than an impartial authority, it leads to a loss of public confidence in the institution. Officers are then seen not as protectors of justice, but as tools of political manipulation, contributing to a vicious cycle where political actors reinforce their hold on power while undermining the law's ability to safeguard citizens' rights.

The interconnection between political influence and the internal dynamics of the police department creates a situation in which political interference becomes both a direct and indirect force shaping the department's operations. The power dynamics within the department are intimately linked to political agendas, and officers constantly recalibrate their actions based on the shifting priorities of the political elite. This structural entanglement between law enforcement and politics serves as a significant barrier to effective policing and challenges the core principles of impartial justice.

Internal Conflict and Moral Compromise

The theme of internal conflict and moral compromise among law enforcement officers in Kohat, due to political interference, emerges strongly through the interviews. Several officers express an emotional and psychological toll resulting from balancing their professional duties with the demands of politicians. One respondent eloquently stated, *"It's difficult to ignore politicians when they call,"* revealing how political figures use gifts or assistance as tools of influence. The internal conflict here is palpable, as officers must navigate the choice of compromising their values for personal comfort or career stability. This dilemma reflects a broader issue where the law enforcement system is tainted by political demands that often take precedence over professional ethics and the law.

Another respondent touched on the ethical implications of accepting such gifts, stating, *"Many believe that taking these 'gifts' is acceptable, a part of our profession, but where do we draw the line?"* This quote highlights the blurred line between acceptable professional behavior and potential corruption, with officers questioning whether they are genuinely benefiting the community or inadvertently strengthening the political grip on law enforcement. This situation underscores the risk of diminishing public trust in the police force, as loyalty to political figures often trumps the commitment to justice.

Moreover, the discussion about promotions and career advancement is intricately linked to political connections, revealing how meritocracy is undermined. One officer remarked, *"Look, we all know that promotions are supposed to be based on performance, but in reality, it's more about staying in the right place for the right people."* This reflects the notion that career progression within the Kohat police force is not based on merit but rather on political allegiance. The system fosters a culture where positions and promotions are seen as "gifts" from political figures, further exacerbating the moral compromises officers face. The pervasive political influence creates an environment where an officer's loyalty to the state is secondary to loyalty to political figures, resulting in a weakened law enforcement structure.

The psychological strain of such a system is also evident in the personal stories shared by officers. One respondent spoke candidly about the emotional toll, stating, *"The pressure we are facing is invisible to anyone outside our station. They believe that we choose to be corrupt, yet they are unaware of the struggles we deal with on a daily basis."* The respondent emphasizes the disconnect between public perception and the reality of political pressures that officers face, shedding light on the internal battles of law enforcement personnel. This moral tension causes burnout and disillusionment, as officers feel torn between their personal ethics and the demands imposed by the political system. The mental strain caused by constant compromise, fear of career

repercussions, and internal conflict is a major contributor to the deteriorating morale within the police force.

Finally, officers' candid remarks about coping mechanisms such as laughter to mask their emotional distress indicate the personal toll of political interference. One officer mentioned, *"You know, every day feels like a balancing act."* This comment encapsulates the difficult daily decisions officers must make, balancing their moral compass with the demands of their job. The emotional burden of complying with political pressures, coupled with the lack of support, leaves officers feeling isolated and unsure of their role within the police force. This highlights the urgent need for reforms, including mental health support and ethical training, to mitigate the psychological strain and restore integrity to the Kohat police force.

These interviews reveal a deep-rooted crisis within the Kohat police force, where political interference not only hampers law enforcement efficacy but also undermines the officers' moral integrity. The psychological and ethical dilemmas faced by officers need urgent attention, through both systemic reforms and enhanced support structures, to ensure the long-term sustainability of law enforcement in Kohat.

Political Influence and Police Autonomy

The experiences shared by the police officers of Kohat district, reveal a complex and difficult dynamic between their professional responsibilities and the political pressures they face in their daily work. Many respondents emphasized the tension between their desire to serve with integrity and the realities of political interference, which often undermines their ability to make unbiased, merit-based decisions. As one respondent stated, *"It's really challenging to function here only on the basis of merit, to be honest. We all understand the fundamentals of justice; for instance, we use Hazrat Umar Farooq's period as an example, when justice came first. However, in this case, political involvement follows us about like a shadow."*

Political pressure was frequently cited as a pervasive force that affects decision-making within the police force. Officers often found themselves caught between upholding the law and succumbing to the demands of powerful local figures or politicians. One officer noted, *"We do occasionally have the opportunity to follow merit, but it's not always easy. Sometimes we can hold our ground when the subject is not very sensitive or the political implications are minimal. However, it is nearly impossible to withstand pressure in well-publicized incidents."* This tension highlights the moral and ethical struggles faced by officers, as they seek to balance their duty to serve the public with the power dynamics that shape their work environment.

The interviews also illustrated the varying degrees to which police officers were able to resist political influence. Some officers expressed a sense of disillusionment, acknowledging that political pressures often eroded their capacity to act autonomously. One respondent shared, *"Our ability to operate solely in accordance with the law has been severely hampered by political meddling. Sometimes we wish to act on the basis of unambiguous evidence, but someone powerful calls and asks us to change our mind."* These statements reveal the significant challenges officers face in maintaining their professional ethics when external forces impose their will upon them.

However, there were instances where police officers managed to maintain some level of independence and integrity despite the political climate. Some respondents emphasized that, in the absence of direct political consequences, they could make decisions based on merit. For example, one officer shared, *"We know our responsibility to the people, and many of us try to do the right thing despite the pressure. We occasionally have to make difficult decisions about whether to obey commands or follow our conscience."* This sentiment indicates a sense of personal duty and commitment to justice, despite the systemic constraints they face.

The hierarchical structure within the police force was another factor that contributed to the perpetuation of political interference. Respondents indicated that the chain of command often functioned as a conduit for external political influence, creating a system in which lower-ranking officers had little choice but to comply with orders, even if they contradicted their professional ethics. One officer admitted, *"Even if an order contradicts our moral convictions, it is not our place to dispute it when it comes from above. You realize that politics are deeply ingrained in a place like Kohat."* This illustrates the power dynamics within the police force, where officers are often caught in a struggle between their personal sense of justice and the demands of the political environment.

The data highlights the persistent challenge of political interference in the Kohat police force. While many officers strive to act justly and impartially, the pervasive influence of politics often limits their ability to do so. However, some officers continue to navigate these pressures with a sense of personal responsibility and commitment to their professional ethics. The interviews reflect a complex interplay between law enforcement's duty to uphold justice and the powerful political forces that shape their decision-making, suggesting that the autonomy of police officers is continually compromised in a politically charged environment.

Political Meddling and Its Impact on Professionalism, Morale, and Case Integrity

Political interference in the Kohat police force significantly disrupts both the procedural integrity of investigations and the morale of officers. Officers frequently find themselves navigating a complex environment where they must balance the demands of public order, legal processes, and political pressure. As one officer put it, *"We must strike a balance between upholding public order, addressing neighborhood concerns, and conducting investigations, but political meddling frequently makes matters more difficult."* This quote encapsulates the central challenge officers face, where external political demands often conflict with the goals of impartial policing and justice.

The demands from politicians can distort the natural flow of investigations. A recurring issue mentioned by respondents was the way political figures attempt to direct the course of specific cases, sometimes requesting prioritization or delays based on personal or political interests. One officer revealed, *"Politicians occasionally attempt to sway the filing of FIRs or advance certain cases, even when there aren't good reasons to do so."* Such interventions disrupt the normal process of case management, which should ideally follow legal protocols and evidence-based procedures. The constant pressure to accommodate political requests forces officers to adopt a reactive rather than proactive approach, which compromises the objectivity and quality of investigations.

This political pressure is particularly evident during the early stages of investigation, which fall under the responsibility of the SHO Operations. Officers emphasized that this phase, crucial for collecting accurate data and laying the foundation for a case, is often undermined by external influences. *"Even before the first steps are completely finished, we receive calls from powerful people requesting updates or favors on certain situations,"* one officer explained. The early stages of an investigation, which should be focused on establishing facts and maintaining procedural integrity, are thus clouded by political considerations. This disruption is not just limited to operational processes but extends to the emotional and professional burden carried by officers. *"It's quite difficult, particularly if they are demanding. I've had to change my regular approach in order to prevent conflict, which can interfere with our operations and damage the department's reputation with the public,"* another respondent noted. This adaptation is a survival tactic, signaling that officers are often forced to compromise on their professional standards to avoid confrontation.

The second phase of investigation, overseen by SHO Investigation, suffers similarly from political intervention. Here, the influence of external forces is more direct, with powerful individuals exerting influence over the investigative process. One officer shared, *"They provide the SHO instructions after calling him. They occasionally even exert pressure on the investigating officer to revise or leave out portions of the report."* This not only affects the integrity of the case but also undermines the credibility of the report. Officers are faced with the moral dilemma of either complying with political demands or adhering to professional and ethical standards. This situation results in a loss of trust, both within the police force and in the community. One officer remarked, *"The 'challan,' which ought to be a sound, objective report, may be modified under duress. This impacts people's belief in us and our reputation."*

Another dimension of the issue is the long-term impact on morale and the overall culture within the department. Respondents spoke about the frustration that arises when officers are compelled to act contrary to their professional judgment. *"Being professional becomes a never-ending battle,"* said one officer, expressing the emotional toll of political pressure. The feeling of powerlessness is compounded by the fact that such interferences often seem inevitable, as political figures wield significant power over promotions and career advancements. As one officer described, *"Our credibility is called into question when we get directives that appear to protect particular people. We are supposed to collect evidence objectively, but how can we do so when we are always under pressure to ignore certain facts?"* This speaks to a systemic issue where professional integrity is continually tested by political considerations, resulting in a compromised sense of duty among officers.

The frustration is further amplified by the lack of procedural clarity when political pressures interfere. As one officer elaborated, *"The division of SHO Operations from SHO Investigation is a solid concept in theory. However, this system is disrupted by political involvement."* The dual SHO arrangement, designed to improve the efficiency and accountability of investigations, is frequently derailed by political meddling. The need for clear communication and cooperation between SHO Operations and SHO Investigation is undermined when political figures demand that certain cases be expedited or manipulated. This disruption in communication not only affects the immediate investigation but also leads to a breakdown of trust among officers. Another officer emphasized, *"When political figures interfere, it affects not just the case but the trust among us... our inspectors, SHO Operations, and Investigation must all rely on one another's efforts."*

Finally, the public perception of the police is significantly harmed by these systemic issues. Officers are acutely aware that political interference leads to delays, selective handling of cases, and a loss of accountability. As one officer pointed out, *"The people suffer because this not only lowers morale but also postpones justice."* The credibility of the police department is directly linked to its ability to maintain fairness and efficiency, but political pressures consistently prevent the department from operating as an independent body. The officers' concerns about losing public trust are rooted in the reality that community service becomes compromised when police actions are shaped by external forces rather than the pursuit of justice.

Managing Political Interference in Policing during Elections

Throughout the interviews, SHOs described an acute intensification of political pressure around election time, revealing how electoral cycles exacerbate existing power imbalances and generate profound role conflict for officers. As one respondent explained, *"We must strike a balance between upholding public order, addressing neighborhood concerns, and conducting investigations, but political meddling frequently makes matters more difficult. Politicians will occasionally pressure us to delay some cases or give priority to others."* This illustrates how the professional norms of

impartial policing are repeatedly undermined by partisan interests, forcing officers into a continuous negotiation between legal procedure and political expediency.

Several SHOs emphasized that formal hierarchies particularly the support of their District Police Officer (DPO) serve as a critical bulwark against undue influence. One officer noted, *"Politicians in our area frequently call us directly since they know us personally. However, we are dedicated to the work...and I sought advice from my DPO. In all honesty, it's our only defense and is a requirement of the procedure."* This reliance on internal chains of command underscores the importance of bureaucratic autonomy and procedural safeguards in preserving the integrity of investigations under duress.

Election periods amplify these tensions: *"For us, things change when election season arrives. Although it's our responsibility to keep the peace, local officials occasionally try to urge us to be softer on their followers or harsher on their rivals."* The fluctuating demands of competing political camps turn routine law enforcement into a political battleground, where neutrality becomes both a professional mandate and an untenable luxury. Officers described the strain vividly: *"The amount of strain we endure throughout election season is beyond your comprehension...We're just trying to do our jobs, but it feels like we're caught in a tug-of-war."*

Despite these pressures, some SHOs invoke a collective ethic and adherence to formal directives as strategies of resistance. One senior officer reflected, *"It is our responsibility to defend everyone equally, yet politicians want us to do certain things, especially during election time... Every time we act impartially in a circumstance, we strengthen public confidence in both the democratic process and ourselves."* Another added, *"There is pressure, no question about it...however, our line of command is quite explicit about upholding justice, and we operate as a team. The reputation of the entire police force would suffer if we begin to give in to political pressure."* These statements have pointed to an emergent culture of solidarity, where adherence to procedure and peer support become key mechanisms for maintaining both organizational legitimacy and public trust in the face of overt political intrusion.

Consequences of Defying Political Interference in policing

When SHOs in Kohat choose to resist political directives, they frequently incur severe professional and personal repercussions. One officer described the immediate fallout of standing up to power: *"I once refused to ignore a case involving a local politician... I was moved to a less desirable position the very following week."* This transfer not only uprooted him from the community he had served but also signaled to colleagues that defiance would be met with punishment rather than respect for integrity. Transfers to remote or unattractive posts emerged repeatedly as a tool to discipline officers who refused to comply: *"You'll be packing your bags next week if you don't follow our instructions,"* another respondent recalled being told.

Beyond career penalties, officers face orchestrated smear campaigns and disciplinary inquiries intended to intimidate and discredit. As one SHO explained, *"After politically tinged investigations, I have seen cops suspended; even if they are eventually found not guilty, the harm has already been done. Their reputations are damaged."* Such prosecutions often without merit create a chilling effect, discouraging other officers from challenging undue influence. The mere threat of a public inquiry can erode years of hard-earned credibility, effectively silencing dissent.

Defiance can also escalate to direct threats against officers and their families. One respondent recounted how defying an order led to his home being targeted: *"They set fire to our wooden front door... It helped me realize that politics and personal matters are no longer just empty phrases in my community. They turn violent."* Another officer described the terror of being warned, *"If you don't comply, your life and your family's lives are in danger."* These high-stakes intimidations transform policing into a constant risk

assessment, where protecting one's loved ones may override the commitment to impartial law enforcement. Such reprisals produce profound psychological strain. Officers report sleepless nights, anxiety, and a pervasive sense of isolation: "It's tiring... we frequently feel like mere political pawns." This moral injury knowing that upholding justice can incur devastating costs undermines job satisfaction and can lead to burnout or resignation. As one SHO noted, "I joined the force to serve and protect, not to engage in political games... Ultimately, the integrity of Kohat's law enforcement is at risk, not just our careers." These consequences reinforce a culture of silence and compliance. Witnessing colleagues penalized for defying orders teaches newer officers that survival depends on political allegiance rather than professional ethics. This cycle perpetuates selective enforcement, weakens institutional autonomy, and erodes public trust, as citizens come to see the police not as guardians of justice but as expendable instruments in political struggles. In sum, the cost of defiance in Kohat is steep jeopardizing careers, families, and the very legitimacy of the policing institution.

Discussion

Recent research on police reactions to political pressure indicates that most officers, particularly in states with high political interference, will tend to acquiesce to political pressures to evade punitive measures. A study conducted by Zhao et al. (2023) noted that officers are usually caught in a quandary where they have to juggle professional ethics and the reality of job security. Participants in their study discussed how direct interference within duty hours usually results in a dilemma between upholding integrity and obedience. The same trends were noted in the present study, where Kohat SHOs routinely reported being posted to less favourable positions after defying political pressure. In turn, going against political interference incurs high professional costs, supporting the concept that career maintenance tends to come at the expense of ethical policing.

According to Baughman et al. (2024), political parties bestow personal rewards to police officers, including promotions, high-paying assignments, and material rewards, thus ensuring loyalty. In Kohat, officers indicated receiving material rewards, such as high-paying postings in sensitive political areas or short-term promotions, for acquiescence to party wishes. Patronage is a type of clientelism, according to Snyder and Bhattacharyya (2023), in which political leaders distribute public goods and services to achieve cooperation from a specific group here, such as police officers.

Recent research by Baker (2023) on police militarization when confronting public demonstrations finds common ground in the results reported in Kohat. Police officers in politically motivated areas are trained to confront protests as security issues and not as acts of free speech and thus adopt more aggressive approaches. This trend indicates Miller's (2020) "Political Policing Model," which holds the police as tools of political oppression, especially in public unrest. If police forces become politicized, their operations are guided by party interests rather than public safety and rights.

Police officers in Kohat complained of frequent interference by political players, especially during working hours, such as pressure to overlook some cases or act selectively against political opponents. Just as a lone act of vandalism going unrepaired can contribute to a spate of lawlessness, ongoing political favouritism tolerated gives rise to systemic corruption, with resulting internal rifts within the force and external disenchantment from the public. As Tyler (2004) argues in procedural justice theory, the police's perceived legitimacy is central to voluntary law compliance. Once that legitimacy is compromised, so is the effectiveness of policing.

When applied to political interference, the Broken Window metaphor helps us grasp how modest acts of

institutional neglect, such as accepting political phone calls or flexible rule-bending for one's advantage, can build up into total institutional failure. For Kohat's police, uncontrolled political interference has normalized dependency and fear, deterring officers from behaving neutrally and undermining public trust in the police. This is consistent with the central argument of BWT: unless minor disorders are met with quick and visible handling, they will convey to internal and external actors alike that deviance is acceptable and causes increased dysfunction. Political intervention must thus be considered not as a one-off aberration but as a systemic weakness. Without strong internal accountability processes, civil service promotion systems with transparency, and civilian control, the policing apparatus is vulnerable to collapse from within.

Conclusion

This qualitative research investigated the implications of resisting political interference in policing in District Kohat, Pakistan. The research discovered that political interference in the form of pressure during working hours, favouritism, and manipulation of police reactions to public incidents has extensively impacted the operational independence and moral integrity of police officers. Those who refuse such interference are severely punished, such as being unwantedly transferred, threatened, and hindered in their careers. Conversely, people who obey to earn favours such as political patronage, coveted placements, and promotions are in the picture. In this case, police departments get embedded with a culture of terror and dependence. The study discovered that political interference warps the police's function as a neutral enforcer of the law, replacing merit-based decision-making with political allegiance. The impact is most noticeable when police responses are based on protestors' political connections rather than the demands of public safety, as happens during public protests. Biased enforcement undermines faith in law enforcement and damages the rule of law. Understood in terms of the Broken Window Theory, political meddling is seen as a kind of institutional chaos. Just as unrepaired physical chaos indicates lawlessness and provokes additional crime, accepting political meddling in the police force indicates a failure of internal governance and promotes broader corruption and inefficiency. The theory highlights how seemingly trivial breaches of professional standards can develop into systemic failure if ignored. Resuscitating order in the policing institution is important for internal morale and promoting justice, equity, and democratic principles in society. The research adds to the larger narrative of police governance in politically unstable environments. It provides actionable findings for policymakers, civil society, and law enforcement agencies seeking to develop a more autonomous, professional, and community-focused police system in Pakistan and other developing countries.

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