The Relation between Regionalism and Environmental Perception
(A Case Study of South-Eastern Iran)

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

A major portion of individuals’ actions and behaviors in societies is a function of their mentality and perception of the present situation. According to environmental perception, the role of people’s mentality and interpretation involves the organization of environment’s physical elements, and orientation towards development and security. Meanwhile, given their vastness and high numbers in population, countries are different in terms of regional diversity (geological and cultural) where the notions of national solidarity and territorial cohesion are driven by regionalist forces. During the recent decade, the south-east of Iran, which is home to the Baloch Tribe, has been facing a number of unsafe regional events due to its special geographical location as well as being at the vicinity of unstable geopolitical factors. Accordingly, the purpose of the present study is to examine the existing environmental factors (human and natural) in forming a mentality (i.e. environmental perception) regarding the emergence and continuity of regionalism within south-east of Iran.

The approach used in this study is the descriptive-analytical method and the required data and information were collected through library studies along with surveys (questionnaires). According to the analysis of data, the result of the study showed that the environmental perception risen from the components of political participation, economic underdevelopment, interactions with the Indian subcontinent, and religious regionalism have led to a set of intertwined consequences at the regional, national, and local levels, playing a significant role in the target society’s perception of regionalism.

2. Methodology

The present study was conducted through the descriptive-analytical approach, and the data collection was carried out using library studies and surveys (questionnaires).

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In this study, four variables including weak political participation and economic underdevelopment adjacent to the Indian subcontinent and religious regionalism were selected as the indices for testing the hypotheses of the study all of which could affect the regional security of Sistan and Baluchestan Province. A set of components were also taken into account so as to evaluate the indices. The Likert scale was also used to evaluate the extent of agreement. In order to analyze the findings of the study, particularly testing the hypothesis, the chi-square test was employed.

3. Findings and Discussion

In the present study, four variables including weak political participation and economic underdevelopment adjacent to the Indian subcontinent, and religious regionalism were selected as the indices for testing the hypotheses. A number of components were also considered in order to evaluate the indices. The Likert scale was used to assess the extent of agreement along with the chi-square test. In the present research, the role of environmental structures (human and natural) in shaping mentality (environmental perception) and the occurrence of regionalism in south-east of Iran is explored. Such a role is carried out through formulating the hypothesis of environmental structures (political participation, economic underdevelopment, interaction with the Indian subcontinent and religious regionalism) at a local, national and subnational scales in shaping mentality (environmental perception) and the occurrence of regionalism in south-east of Iran as a result of the environmental structures. The following results were obtained using the gathered library and field data according to the analysis of the findings of the study and testing the variables of hypothesis. The findings showed that the factors influencing the emergence of regionalist mentality in Sistan and Baluchestan Province was weak participation in all aspects, such as political, economic, social, etc.

The weak political participation in the region (participation in election component) was particularly frequent according to the analysis of the finding; however, it seemed to be the result of a) decreased national solidarity as a result of weak participation of Sunnis in matters related to the province and the country, b) the pessimistic mentality of Sunnis toward the authorities’ approaches and actions at the region and the province.

Furthermore, using the chi-square test, the impact of variables including a) economic underdevelopment, b) adjacent to the Indian subcontinent (Pakistan and Afghanistan), and c) religious regionalism as well as related components were examined. The findings showed that all of these variables and components were affected by regionalism. Accordingly, the results obtained from analyzing the variables of the study demonstrate that weak political participation and economic underdevelopment have paved the way for a confidence crisis in south-east of Iran, influencing the security of said region during the past two decades. The negative perspective of people regarding the performance and functionality of the government is due to lack of attention to the establishment of border markets,
development of free economic zones and employment rise, reduction in attracting domestic and foreign tourists as a result of weak security, decrease in national and international investment due to weak security and the residents’ inability in catering for their livelihood needs due to the economic underdevelopment of the region.

On the other hand, though being a neighbor to the Indian subcontinent (Pakistan) and Afghanistan could result in the cultural influence of Iran, it has also led to the interference of foreign agents in Iran’s domestic affairs, which is usually one of the ways through which nationalist and regionalist thoughts could penetrate into the country. Subsequently, the lingual and religious consistency (Baluchi language and Hanafi religion) has provided a context for interaction between south-eastern Iran and the Indian subcontinent, i.e. Pakistan and Afghanistan; As a result, the religious regionalism movements are formed in this part of the country while influencing the security of the region.

Various ethnicities and religious minorities are accommodated in the most sensitive strategic areas of the country at the border lines which continues beyond the borders and outside the national governments area of influence. Consequently, south-eastern Iran (Sistan and Baluchestan) is located at the Golden Crescent area (a location that is inaccessible by the three governments of Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan, becoming the main passage for drug gangs, heroin production and arms trafficking) transformed into a gathering location for fundamentalist terrorists following the debacle of Taliban in Afghanistan, which possibly leads to the formation of profound platforms for regionalism in the area of the study.

**Keywords:** Environmental perception, regionalism, regional security, Sistan and Baluchestan Province

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