



ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 04 No. 02. Oct-Dec 2025. Page#. 2112-2123

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17766530>**The Politics of Crisis and the Framing of Migration: Shaping Policy and Public Perception****Dr. Muhammad Makki Kakar**

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Email Address: shoukat.polscience@um.uob.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

Migration has increasingly been framed as a crisis by political actors and media organizations across the world. This crisis narrative has become a powerful political tool for shaping public opinion, influencing policy decisions, and constructing migrants as threats to national, cultural, or economic security. This study explores how political discourse and media representations contribute to the construction of migration as a crisis, and how these narratives affect public perception and policymaking. While crisis framing appears globally, its intensity, motivations, and impacts vary across political contexts. In developed nations, migration has often been politicized during election cycles, securitized in policy debates, and linked to economic uncertainties or cultural anxieties. In developing contexts, including Pakistan, crisis narratives around migration intersect with challenges such as internal displacement, refugee influxes, and political instability. Using a qualitative research design, this study investigates the perspectives of thirteen key informants working in policymaking institutions in Pakistan. In-depth interviews were conducted, and thematic analysis was employed to identify dominant narrative patterns and the political logics behind them. Five major themes emerged: the strategic construction of crisis narratives, media's amplification role, public fear formation, securitization of migration policy, and the political utility of crisis framing. Findings indicate that crisis narratives are not merely descriptive but are intentionally constructed to legitimize certain political agendas, restrict migration policies, or mobilize public support. Participants emphasized that these narratives often overshadow structural issues such as governance failures, socio-economic inequalities, and global power dynamics shaping migration flows. The study concludes by highlighting the need for evidence-based narratives and more responsible political communication to mitigate polarized perceptions and foster humane, balanced migration policies.

Keywords: *Politics of Crises, Framing of Migration, Policy, Public Perception.*

1. Introduction

A global worldview on migration is shaped by a complex interplay of economic, political, social, and environmental factors, which significantly impact policy-making. Economic opportunities and disparities are primary drivers, as migration is often seen as a means to expand economic prospects and reduce poverty, thereby contributing to sustainable development (Elitaş, 2024; Radac et al., 2024). Political instability, violence, and conflict also play crucial roles, prompting

individuals to seek safety and stability elsewhere (Radac et al., 2024). Environmental changes, including climate change, are increasingly recognized as significant factors influencing migration patterns, necessitating policies that address these emerging challenges (Radac et al., 2024). The governance of migration is further complicated by the need to protect human rights and manage the vulnerabilities of migrants, which are often exacerbated by inadequate national and international protections (Filipovski, 2024; Koser, 2010). The interconnectedness of the modern world demands a shift from unilateral national policies to multilateral approaches that recognize the global nature of migration (Koser, 2010; Sassen, 2005). This includes fostering international cooperation to manage migration effectively and humanely, as national policies alone are insufficient to address the complexities of global migration (Koser, 2010). Additionally, migration governance varies significantly across regions, influenced by historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts, which shape both the challenges and opportunities presented by migration (Geddes, 2021; Money, 2022). As migration continues to rise, policy-makers are urged to view it as a global responsibility and an opportunity for human development, rather than a threat, by adopting comprehensive strategies that integrate migration with broader development goals (Besharov & Lopez, 2016; Elitaş, 2024).

Migration in developing countries is driven by a complex interplay of factors, with economic disparities, political instability, and environmental challenges being primary motivators. Economic inequality and lack of opportunities in less-developed regions push individuals to seek better livelihoods elsewhere, often in more developed countries (Castles, 2014; Radac et al., 2024). Political factors, including governance issues, human rights violations, and conflict, significantly influence migration patterns, as individuals flee violence and seek safety (Radac et al., 2024; Raleigh, 2011). Environmental factors, particularly climate change and water scarcity, are increasingly recognized as critical drivers, exacerbating socio-economic vulnerabilities and prompting migration as a coping strategy (Nagabhatla et al., 2020; Sim-Sarka, 2025). The cultural context, including migration culture and social networks, also plays a crucial role, as seen in the case of Ghanaian and Nigerien migrants during the Libyan crisis, where established networks and smuggling rings facilitated migration (Kandilige & Hamidou, n.d.). Crisis narratives further shape migration by framing it as a crisis itself, influencing public perception and policy responses. These narratives, often constructed by media and policymakers, can amplify the perception of migration as a threat, affecting both the migrants' experiences and the host countries' policies (Cantat et al., 2023; Dennison, 2021). The concept of crisis migration challenges the notion that migration inherently causes crises, instead highlighting how crises in origin countries drive migration (Moreira & Borba, 2021). Understanding these dynamics requires a nuanced approach that considers both the structural drivers and the subjective narratives that influence migration decisions and policies (Czaika & Reinprecht, 2020).

The framing of migration issues significantly influences public opinion and policy decisions in Pakistan, as evidenced by various narratives and media portrayals. Migration narratives in Pakistan are shaped by multiple factors, including climate change, ethnic tensions, and economic challenges. The country faces severe climate-induced migration due to its high vulnerability to environmental risks, yet the state is ill-prepared to address these challenges, often politicizing the issue by attributing blame to India (Martuscelli, 2023). The role of narratives in migration policy-making is crucial, as they often reflect cognitive plausibility, moral appeal, and alignment with perceived interests, which can legitimize certain policy preferences (Boswell et al., 2011). Media narratives, particularly in the context of Afghan refugees, demonstrate a systematic othering that influences public perception and legitimizes exclusionary state policies (Urooj et al., 2025). This is further complicated by the lack of a

comprehensive migration policy and fragmented governance, which hinders effective migration management (Cheema et al., 2023). The framing of migration as a security threat or economic burden, as seen in the media's portrayal of Afghan and Bengali refugees, affects public opinion and policy, with social media often adopting more humanitarian frames compared to print media (Khan et al., 2022). Additionally, the negative perception of internal migration as a failure to adapt to climate change hampers the integration of migration into climate adaptation strategies, reflecting a broader issue of separate treatment of climate change and migration in national policies (Bott, 2016). Overall, the framing of migration in Pakistan is influenced by a complex interplay of media narratives, political interests, and socio-economic factors, which collectively shape public opinion and policy decisions.

This research explores how political actors and media in Pakistan frame migration as a crisis and how these narratives shape public perception and policymaking. The study contributes to global debates by situating Pakistan within international migration discourse while highlighting its unique political, social, and historical conditions. The significance of the study lies in revealing the construction of crisis narratives as political tools, not objective realities. Understanding these narratives helps unpack how public fears, stereotypes, and policies are shaped, ultimately affecting migrant lives and undermining evidence-based governance. The findings provide insights for scholars, policymakers, and civil society advocates working toward more balanced and humane migration policies.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Migration as a Politically Constructed Crisis

Media portrayals of migration significantly influence public perceptions and policy decisions by shaping narratives that can either foster understanding or exacerbate fear and prejudice. Research indicates that media framing—whether emphasizing security concerns, economic impacts, or humanitarian crises—can sway public attitudes toward migration, often leading to misconceptions about the size and nature of immigrant populations (Blinder & Jeannet, 2014; Ismail et al., 2024). For instance, during the European refugee crisis, media narratives varied widely, affecting public opinion based on local contexts and historical experiences with migration (Koikkalainen et al., 2021). Furthermore, biased portrayals can reinforce stereotypes, such as the dichotomy between skilled and unskilled migrants, which complicates public understanding and can influence policy preferences (Gjerazi, 2024). Ultimately, the interplay between media narratives and public sentiment can lead to significant political ramifications, including the rise of xenophobia and far-right movements in response to perceived threats posed by migrants (Ferreira, 2019).

2.2. Media's Role in Amplifying Crisis Framing

The media's ability to amplify crisis framing is influenced by several key factors, including sensationalism, framing techniques, and the credibility of sources. Sensationalist coverage, characterized by emotional language and graphic visuals, can exacerbate public fear and panic, as seen during the pandemic and the COVID-19 outbreak, where media exposure heightened anxiety and led to maladaptive behaviors like hoarding (Dabas, 2022; Garfin et al., 2020). Additionally, the framing of information—whether it emphasizes conflict and damage or presents a more balanced view—significantly affects public perception, with tabloid media often amplifying risks more dramatically than quality press (Rossmann et al., 2018). The consequences of this amplification can be severe, leading to public health repercussions, increased stress responses, and a potential overload on healthcare systems, underscoring the ethical responsibility of media to provide accurate and constructive reporting during crises (Garfin et al., 2020).

2.3. Securitization Theory and Migration Policy

Securitization Theory significantly influences the development and implementation of migration policies across various countries by framing migration as a security issue rather than a humanitarian concern. This shift has been particularly evident in the European Union, where the securitization of migration policies has led to enhanced border security measures in countries like Greece and Turkey, driven by EU financial and technical support (Altunbaş & Memisoglu, 2024). The prevailing narrative post-2008 financial crisis has further entrenched this security paradigm, often overshadowing the potential benefits of migration and leading to the criminalization of migrants, perceived as threats to public order (Perelló Carrascosa, 2018). In Turkey, the relationship with the EU, especially through agreements like the 2016 Deal, has shaped its migration management, emphasizing security over rights (Eminoğlu, 2024). Meanwhile, in Germany, the historical context of migration has prompted a nuanced approach, balancing labor needs with security concerns, as seen in recent immigration policies aimed at addressing skilled labor shortages (Özdemir & Şahin, 2025). Overall, the application of Securitization Theory reveals a complex interplay between national security interests and migration governance globally (Grigor'eva, 2021).

2.4. Migration Narratives in the Global South

Migration narratives significantly shape the cultural and socio-economic landscapes of local communities in the Global South, often reflecting and reinforcing existing inequalities. Dominant discourses frequently portray migrants from the Global South as victims of dire circumstances, neglecting the structural factors perpetuated by Western involvement that contribute to their displacement (Samadi, 2021). In Chile, media narratives create a dichotomy between "civilized" and "uncivilized" migrants, influencing public perception and policy responses, which can exacerbate social tensions and discrimination (Urbina, 2018). Furthermore, the rise of amenity and lifestyle migration to Latin America highlights how such movements can deepen local inequalities, as affluent migrants often contribute to real estate speculation and social exclusion, thereby altering community dynamics and access to resources (Rainer, 2019). Overall, these narratives not only affect the migrants' experiences but also reshape local identities and socio-economic conditions, necessitating a critical examination of their implications (Araújo, 2022; Ojeda, 2023).

2.5. Impact of Crisis Narratives on Public Perception

Crisis narratives significantly shape public perception of risk and uncertainty, influencing both individual behavior and policy-making. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted how cultural factors and governance styles affect the social construction of risk, with countries like China effectively communicating crisis narratives that fostered compliance with health policies, unlike India, which faced challenges due to less cohesive narratives (Hossain et al., 2023). Similarly, the BSE crisis in the UK demonstrated that miscommunication and a lack of transparency regarding scientific uncertainties can exacerbate public distrust and hinder effective policy responses (Millstone & Zwanenberg, 2007). Furthermore, narratives surrounding environmental crises, such as those in dry lands, illustrate how dominant narratives can legitimize exploitative policies, emphasizing the need for diverse perspectives in policymaking. Ultimately, understanding public risk perceptions, as explored in studies of COVID-19, is crucial for effective crisis communication and future preparedness (Davis, 2022; Lohiniva et al., 2022).

Materials and Methods

A qualitative research design was employed to explore the politics of crisis framing in migration discourse. The study area was Pakistan, and the target population consisted of stakeholders

working in policymaking institutions, including government departments, legislative bodies, think tanks, and migration-related agencies. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify participants with relevant expertise. Thirteen key informants were selected, all of whom held significant experience in migration policymaking, media regulatory affairs, or political communication. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, allowing participants to express their interpretations, insights, and professional experiences related to migration discourse. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed through thematic analysis. Codes were generated inductively, clustered into broader themes, and interpreted to understand underlying political logics and media dynamics that shape migration narratives. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality and informed consent, were carefully observed.

3. Data Analysis and Discussion

3.1. Strategic Political Construction of Crisis Narratives

The analysis of participant narratives revealed a strong consensus that the construction of migration as a “crisis” is not accidental but a calculated political strategy. Participants consistently emphasized that political actors deliberately shape public discourse to portray migration as an emergency, thereby strengthening their own authority and diverting attention from deeper structural issues. As one participant explained, “Politicians know that calling something a crisis gives them power—when migration is framed as a national emergency, people stop questioning the real issues like governance failures, and the political leaders get more space to push their own agenda.”

Participants described this crisis framing as a tool used to legitimize exceptional political actions. Several expressed that by labeling migration as an urgent threat, leaders are able to justify strict policies, centralize decision-making, and rally public support around their political platforms. One participant highlighted that “the word ‘crisis’ creates fear, and fear makes people accept policies they would normally question.” This perception underscores the belief that crisis narratives function as mechanisms of political control rather than reflections of objective realities.

Another important insight from participants was the intentional oversimplification of migration dynamics within these narratives. They noted that complex socioeconomic drivers—such as unemployment, unequal development, and governance deficits—are often overshadowed by sensational political rhetoric that focuses on migrants as a source of instability. According to one participant, “It is easier for politicians to blame migrants than to explain why the system is failing.” This suggests that crisis narratives serve as a strategic distraction from government shortcomings.

Participants also pointed out that the media often amplifies these politically crafted narratives, further embedding them into public consciousness. One participant remarked, “Once politicians call it a crisis, the media repeats it until everyone believes it.” This mutually reinforcing relationship between political rhetoric and media discourse deepens the societal perception of migration as an imminent threat.

Overall, participant accounts reveal that the framing of migration as a crisis is a purposeful political construction rather than a neutral description of reality. These narratives empower political leaders, obscure governance failures, and shape public attitudes through fear and misinformation. The findings suggest that understanding migration governance requires critically unpacking how political actors craft and deploy crisis discourse to influence national debates and decision-making.

3.2. Media Amplification and Emotional Intensification

Participants consistently highlighted the influential role of media in amplifying and emotionalizing migration-related narratives. According to the participants, media outlets frequently sensationalize migration stories, contributing to heightened public fear and reinforcing political crisis frames already circulating in society. Participants emphasized that media coverage often prioritizes dramatic, conflict-driven portrayals over balanced reporting, which intensifies collective emotional reactions. As one participant explained, "The media knows that fear sells when they show dramatic footage or alarming headlines, people immediately panic, even when the situation is not as serious as portrayed."

Many participants described media organizations as active agents in shaping societal perceptions, rather than neutral observers. They noted that stories emphasizing chaos, criminality, or social strain attract more viewership, thereby motivating media outlets to focus on fear-based angles. One participant remarked, "Most people don't see migrants directly; they only see what the media shows. And the media shows things in a way that makes people feel threatened." This perception suggests that emotional intensification is not accidental but embedded in media logic aimed at audience engagement.

Participants also pointed to the commercial motivations behind media framing. They believed that competition for ratings and advertising revenue pushes media houses to adopt sensational reporting styles. As another participant commented, "Channels compete for attention, and the easiest way is to make everything look dramatic. Migration becomes a spectacle instead of a social issue." This insight underscores how economic incentives drive the repetition of exaggerated narratives.

Additionally, many participants expressed concern that political affiliations further shape media discourse. They observed that certain media outlets align themselves with specific political agendas, echoing and reinforcing crisis narratives constructed by political actors. One participant stated, "Some media channels repeat whatever politicians say, especially during election times. It becomes a cycle politicians create fear, and media spreads it." This mutually reinforcing relationship magnifies emotional responses within the public sphere.

Overall, participant accounts indicate that media plays a pivotal role in amplifying migration-related fears by sensationalizing stories, appealing to emotions, and reproducing politically influenced narratives. This process not only shapes public attitudes but also strengthens broader crisis constructions surrounding migration.

3.3. Formation of Public Fear

Participants described the formation of public fear as a gradual but powerful process fueled by the persistent repetition of crisis narratives surrounding migration. According to their accounts, fear does not emerge spontaneously; rather, it develops through sustained exposure to political rhetoric and media amplification that classify migrants as threats to social stability, economic security, and cultural cohesion. One participant noted, "When people hear the same message every day that migrants are a danger they start believing it, even if they have never met a migrant in their life."

A key insight from participants was that public perception becomes shaped less by direct experiences and more by constructed narratives circulated through political speeches, televised debates, and sensational media content. They emphasized that the dominance of these narratives leaves little room for alternative viewpoints or balanced information. As one participant explained, "The positive stories of migrants never make it to the public. All they see are headlines that make them afraid." This highlights the narrative imbalance that contributes to the public's distorted understanding of migration.

Participants also expressed concern that the repeated framing of migration as a crisis creates a psychological environment where fear becomes normalized. They described how emotional responses particularly anxiety and suspicion are strengthened over time as the same messages are echoed across multiple platforms. One participant remarked, "Even if someone tries to think differently, the constant repetition makes them doubt themselves and accept the fear as reality." This shows how crisis discourse becomes internalized within the public consciousness. Moreover, participants observed that nuanced perspectives, especially those emphasizing the socio-economic contributions of migrants, are overshadowed by narratives that stress danger or loss. Participants argued that this overshadowing is not accidental but results from selective storytelling by both political leaders and media outlets. As one participant stated, "Migrants working hard and contributing to the economy is not shown anywhere. Instead, one negative incident is repeated for weeks." This selective representation reinforces a one-dimensional view of migrants as threats.

Overall, participant insights demonstrate that public fear is socially constructed through repetitive, emotionally charged narratives that overshadow migrant contributions. Their accounts highlight how continuous exposure to such narratives shapes public attitudes and entrenches fear-based perceptions, ultimately influencing broader societal responses to migration.

3.4. Securitization of Migration Policy

Participants emphasized that migration policy in Pakistan has increasingly taken on a securitized framing, where migrants are viewed not as individuals with social, economic, or humanitarian needs but as potential security risks. According to participants, this shift is driven by political and institutional discourse that repeatedly links migration with threats such as terrorism, border instability, and internal disorder. One participant stated, "When policymakers talk about migrants, it is always in terms of danger or national security. They hardly discuss the human side of migration anymore."

Participants observed that the securitization discourse restricts the range of policy solutions available. Instead of addressing migration through development-oriented or rights-based approaches, policymakers focus on surveillance, border control, and restrictive regulations. Several participants expressed concern that this narrow framing prevents meaningful reforms that could support migrant welfare or integration. As one participant explained, "Once migration is seen as a security issue, all other options disappear. The debate becomes about control, not about helping people."

Many participants also noted that securitization strengthens state authority and justifies exceptional policy measures that might otherwise face public resistance. They described how governments invoke security language to legitimize stricter monitoring, mass documentation drives, and sudden policy shifts. One participant said, "Security language allows the state to act quickly and harshly. People don't question it because they think it's for national safety." This insight highlights how securitization serves as a political and administrative tool.

Participants further stressed that this framing marginalizes humanitarian concerns. They explained that discussions on migrant rights, well-being, and contributions rarely enter mainstream policy debates because the security narrative overshadows them. One participant remarked, "There is no space for empathy when everything is framed as a threat. Humanitarian issues get pushed aside." Their accounts show how securitization reshapes not only policy design but also public moral imagination.

Additionally, participants believed that securitization distorts public understanding of migration. The constant association of migrants with danger creates an environment where

supportive or inclusive policy proposals are perceived as risky. As another participant commented, "People start thinking that helping migrants is the same as compromising national security."

Overall, participant views indicate that the securitization of migration policy in Pakistan narrows policy choices, legitimizes restrictive measures, and sidelines humanitarian considerations, ultimately shaping a governance environment dominated by fear-driven decision-making.

3.5. Political Utility of Crisis Framing

Participants consistently emphasized that crisis framing serves a significant political purpose by shifting public focus away from long-standing structural issues. They described how political leaders strategically use migration as a convenient narrative to mask governance failures, economic mismanagement, and institutional weaknesses. One participant highlighted this dynamic, stating, "Whenever the government fails to deliver, they quickly turn the discussion toward migrants. It becomes an easy distraction from their own shortcomings."

According to participants, linking migration to national crises allows political actors to reframe public debates in ways that favor their interests. Instead of addressing systemic problems such as unemployment, corruption, or poor service delivery, leaders redirect public frustration toward migrants, transforming them into symbolic representations of broader societal anxieties. As one participant noted, "Migration becomes the blame game. It's easier for politicians to say migrants are the problem than to fix the actual issues."

Participants also stressed that the political utility of crisis framing lies in its emotional appeal. By invoking urgency, danger, and instability, political leaders can rally public support, consolidate authority, and silence criticism. One participant explained, "If people think the country is under threat, they stop questioning the government. Fear works like a shield for those in power." In this sense, crisis rhetoric becomes a mechanism for political survival and legitimacy.

Additionally, participants observed that this strategic framing perpetuates a cycle in which migrants are repeatedly positioned as scapegoats. They described how negative narratives persist even in situations where migration has little or no connection to the underlying problem being discussed. A participant remarked, "Whether it's inflation, unemployment, or security issues, somehow migrants are blamed. It doesn't make sense, but it works politically." This indicates that the utility of crisis framing lies not in accuracy but in political convenience.

Participants further noted that such framing limits meaningful policy debate. Because crisis discourse is rooted in fear and defensiveness, it discourages discussion on development-based or rights-oriented migration solutions. "Once you call something a crisis," one participant stated, "people only focus on quick fixes, not real solutions."

Overall, participant insights reveal that crisis framing is a deliberate political tool used to deflect attention from structural failures, manufacture scapegoats, and manipulate public sentiment. Their accounts underscore how migration becomes entangled in domestic political struggles rather than being approached as a complex social phenomenon.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the framing of migration as a crisis is a politically constructed process shaped by the strategic actions of political leaders and the amplifying mechanisms of media discourse. Through insights gathered from key informants in Pakistan's policymaking institutions, it becomes evident that crisis narratives are intentionally produced to generate fear, mobilize public support, and justify restrictive migration policies. These narratives rarely reflect the complex realities of migration but instead serve political interests by diverting

attention from underlying governance and socio-economic issues. The findings show that crisis framing reshapes public perceptions by simplifying multifaceted migration processes into emotionally charged stories of threat and insecurity. The media's role in intensifying these narratives further establishes migration as a central political concern, even when empirical evidence does not support claims of crisis. Policymaking becomes influenced not by data or humanitarian considerations but by securitized discourses that prioritize control over integration or development. In Pakistan, crisis narratives intersect with regional geopolitics, historical refugee influxes, and domestic political dynamics, making migration a convenient political tool. As a result, public opinion becomes polarized, leading to policies that marginalize migrants and overlook potential economic or social contributions. The study concludes that addressing crisis framing requires responsible political communication, media accountability, and evidence-based policymaking. Shifting from fear-based narratives to informed public dialogue is essential for developing humane, balanced, and sustainable migration policies.

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