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Post-Sovereign and Subaltern Diplomacy: A Postcolonialism Comparative Analysis of Papua, Catalonia, and Kurdistan

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the dynamics of non-state diplomacy practiced by subaltern communities in postcolonial contexts. Using a comparative study of Papua, Catalonia, and Kurdistan, it explores how these communities leverage diaspora networks and digital diplomacy to gain international support, resist state hegemony, and challenge the global order that disproportionately favors state sovereignty. Employing a postcolonial framework, the article analyzes how subaltern groups use social media, transnational forums, and diaspora networks to create symbolic resistance and push back against dominant political narratives. The study is based on secondary data, including reports from international organizations, media publications, and digital activity analyses. The article argues that while subaltern diplomatic strategies have gained effectiveness, especially through the use of social media and the mobilization of diasporas, substantial obstacles remain in achieving wider international recognition. These challenges largely stem from the entrenched dominance of powerful states and an international system that prioritizes state sovereignty over subaltern claims.

KEYWORDS

Catalonia; Papua; Kurdistan; Post-Sovereign; Subaltern Diplomacy

INTRODUCTION

The rise of postcolonial liberation movements today no longer relies on armed violence, but rather on the use of alternative diplomacy that is more peaceful and strategic. The current international system remains inclined to favour the principle of state sovereignty, often overlooking the voices and aspirations of marginalized communities (Grovogui, 2002). This raises a critical question: how can subaltern communities such as Papua, Catalonia, and Kurdistan employ non-state diplomatic strategies through diaspora and digital diplomacy to challenge the hegemony of central states?

In the era of globalisation, subaltern communities marginalized by central governments are increasingly leveraging digital technologies and diaspora networks to articulate their political aspirations more broadly. The postcolonial approach highlights that colonialism did not end with formal national independence, but persists through continued political, economic, and cultural domination by central states over peripheral regions (Said, 1978; Fanon, 1963). In the context of the modern state, this approach reveals the presence of internal colonialism, where central authorities reproduce colonial structures over their peripheral territories (Memmi, 1965; Grosfoguel, 2007).

The term "Subaltern" refers to individuals or groups who are marginalized and positioned outside the mainstream power structures in the dominant social, political, and economic frameworks. This concept originates from Antonio Gramsci's theory, which defines subalterns as those who lack influence in the decision-making processes that shape their lives. (Prakash, 1994).

Linking the concept of subaltern with diplomacy means viewing diplomacy as a tool for marginalized groups to gain international recognition, fight for their rights, and challenge the dominance of powerful nations in the global order. Subaltern diplomacy seeks to create space for voices that are neglected within formal diplomatic systems by utilizing alternative channels and non-traditional strategies to influence global and social policies. This form of diplomacy challenges dominant diplomatic norms and provides an opportunity for marginalized groups to express their voices in international forums such as the United Nations, international conferences, or other global platforms. Subaltern groups can also form alliances with other countries or groups that are similarly underrepresented or overlooked in traditional diplomacy. Additionally, subaltern diplomacy can be seen as a form of resistance to international injustice through human rights advocacy, political freedom struggles, or efforts to gain cultural recognition.

Papua in Indonesia, Catalonia in Spain, and Kurdistan—dispersed across Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and Iran—represent regions subjected to control and oppression by central governments. Although each region has a distinct historical and political context, they share common patterns of marginalization and resistance. Papua, following its controversial integration into Indonesia through the 1969 Act of Free Choice, has experienced economic marginalization, militarisation, and violations of local cultural identity, which remain

contentious in the eyes of parts of the international community (Saltford, 2003). The roots of the conflict over Papua trace back to the post-colonial era, as Indonesia emerged as an independent nation in 1945. The Dutch, having held colonial control over the region of Papua (formerly Dutch New Guinea), were initially reluctant to grant it independence, leading to a protracted struggle. The Indonesian government, under President Sukarno, argued that Papua was an integral part of the nation, seeking to secure its control after the Netherlands ceded sovereignty over the rest of Indonesia in 1949 (Ricklefs, 2001). By 1961, the Dutch had initiated plans to establish Papua as a self-governing territory. However, Indonesia, which had been pushing for integration, pressured the international community to act. This led to the signing of the New York Agreement in 1962, which brokered a transfer of authority from the Dutch to Indonesia, under the condition that a referendum be held in the future to determine the region's political status (Aspinall, 2009).

Catalonia, meanwhile, challenges the dominant narrative of "Spanish" identity and advocates for self-determination, especially following the Franco era, which suppressed the Catalan language and culture (Conversi, 1997). During Franco's rule (1939-1975), Catalonia experienced severe political and cultural repression (Preston, 1994). The region's autonomy was abolished, and its distinct language and culture were suppressed in favor of a unified Spanish identity. Catalan was banned in public life, and intellectuals advocating for its preservation faced persecution (Hernández, 2007). Despite these efforts, Catalans (*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* /ERC) resisted through underground movements that continued to promote their language and culture (Johnson, 2002). The region also faced economic stagnation due to Franco's centralized economic policies (Payne, 2006). While Franco's regime sought to erase Catalan identity, the resilience of its people ensured that Catalonia's cultural legacy endured, awaiting restoration after Franco's death.

Kurdistan, despite its strong historical, cultural, and linguistic identity, is divided across four states and continues to face repression of its identity and autonomy (Gunter, 2011). The Kurdish people have faced long-standing repression in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, where their efforts for autonomy or independence have often been met with brutal suppression. In Turkey, Kurdish identity has been suppressed since the early 20th century, with groups like the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) facing violent crackdowns (Ergil, 2000). In Iraq, the Kurdish population suffered mass executions and chemical attacks under Saddam Hussein's regime, especially during the Anfal Campaign (Human Rights Watch, 1993). Similarly, Iran and Syria have violently suppressed Kurdish activism, denying their cultural and political rights (Khalil, 2001). Despite this, Kurdish resistance continues, with movements like the PKK, Peshmerga, and Syrian Democratic Forces fighting for autonomy (Zasztowt, 2012).

In resisting central state dominance, these communities have developed non-state diplomatic strategies by utilising diaspora networks and digital technologies. The diaspora serves as a bridge between local and global discourses (Adamson, 2012), while digital media

provides a space for the articulation of political identity across borders (Castells, 2015). This study aims to analyse how subaltern communities such as Papua, Catalonia, and Kurdistan employ non-state diplomatic strategies through diaspora and digital diplomacy to challenge central state domination and seek international support in post-sovereign era. It argues that while subaltern diplomatic strategies have gained effectiveness, especially through the use of social media and the mobilization of diasporas, substantial obstacles remain in achieving wider international recognition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Post-Sovereignty Diplomacy refers to diplomatic efforts undertaken by entities or groups that have achieved independence but continue to struggle for the recognition of their political, economic, or cultural rights on the international stage. This form of diplomacy focuses on strengthening the international position of newly independent or historically marginalized nations or groups, despite the lack of full control over the global system and the challenges posed by more powerful states. In this context, post-sovereignty diplomacy aims to seek international recognition, secure resources, and promote policy changes that support their interests, even though they may not have the same diplomatic power as major countries (Acharya, 2018).

The Spectrum of National Liberation encompasses various forms of independence struggles, which can evolve from political liberation into the strengthening of cultural, social, and economic identities. In the context of post-sovereignty diplomacy, this spectrum leads to broader efforts to maintain and advance the values underpinning independence. Countries that have gained formal independence often still face challenges in maintaining their sovereignty in the face of global economic, political, and cultural dominance. Post-sovereignty diplomacy combines efforts to seek not only political recognition but also the strengthening of economic and cultural autonomy (Gandhi, 2006). Newly independent countries or regions fighting for independence continue to strive for freedom on the international stage, but often must compete with powerful nations that dominate the global order. Therefore, post-sovereignty diplomacy becomes a vital tool for resisting international pressures and advocating for national well-being amidst global inequality (Ayoob, 2002).

Non-state diplomacy strategies refer to diplomatic efforts undertaken by actors other than states, such as civil society organizations, NGOs, international organizations, and even diaspora groups. This diplomacy is particularly relevant in the context of post-sovereignty diplomacy, as non-state actors often play a significant role in shaping international public opinion, influencing the foreign policies of major nations, and advocating for the rights of marginalized groups (Haas, 2004). In many cases, newly independent countries or groups fighting for independence do not always have the diplomatic capacity to compete with powerful states. Therefore, non-state diplomacy strategies provide an opportunity for these groups to advocate for their interests through international networks, including through

alternative channels such as global advocacy, public diplomacy, and international campaigns involving diasporas and transnational social movements. These strategies are often more effective in addressing international power imbalances (Keck & Sikkink, 1998).

Subaltern diplomacy is a diplomatic approach employed by marginalized groups or nations within the international order. This concept is influenced by subaltern theory, which refers to groups that are marginalized and lack a voice within dominant power structures. Subaltern diplomacy seeks to provide space for voices that are often unheard in traditional diplomacy dominated by powerful nations and actors. Although subaltern groups may not have official recognition within the international system, they strive to use alternative channels to influence global policy and draw attention to the injustices they face (Prakash, 1994).

In practice, subaltern diplomacy involves human rights advocacy, struggles for political freedom, independence, or cultural recognition. For example, the struggles of newly independent nations like Papua, Catalonia, and Kurdistan use subaltern diplomacy to promote their right to independence or autonomy, despite facing opposition from major countries. Subaltern diplomacy also involves collaboration with international organizations, NGOs, and transnational social movements to create solidarity networks that support social and political change toward greater justice (Gandhi, 2006; Ayoob, 2002).

Linking post-sovereignty diplomacy, the spectrum of national liberation, non-state diplomacy strategies, and subaltern diplomacy provides an understanding of how marginalized groups or newly independent countries seek international recognition and advocate for their rights. Despite often lacking official diplomatic power, they utilize non-traditional approaches and alternative channels to shape global opinion and challenge the dominance of powerful nations within the global order. Subaltern diplomacy, through various forms of resistance and solidarity, strives to disrupt inequality in international relations and foster social and political change that is more inclusive and just (Ayoob, 2002).

The demands for liberation emerging from subnational regions within nation-states are often diverse and can be understood through broader analytical approaches. In this context, the spectrum of liberation among territories that perceive themselves as colonized by central governments can be described across five distinct categories, each with its own goals, methods, and implementation: territorial reform or internal autonomy, symbolic and functional federalism, peaceful separatism, militant or armed separatism, and internationalization and global legitimacy efforts.

The first approach in this spectrum is territorial reform or internal autonomy, where a region does not seek full secession from the parent state, but rather demands more equitable recognition in cultural, political, or economic domains. Such autonomy efforts often arise as a response to perceived marginalization and can function as conflict accommodation strategies designed to avoid escalation while remaining within the framework of the existing state (Bertrand, 2004). Examples include Aceh and Papua in Indonesia, where special

autonomy status was granted following prolonged conflict (Aspinall, 2014). A comparable case is Quebec in Canada, which enjoys a degree of autonomy within Canada's federal framework. This status is typically governed under national constitutional and human rights frameworks, allowing the region to regulate certain domestic affairs without full separation from the state.

The symbolic and functional federalism model seeks to structurally redistribute power within a united national framework. This model often arises when the central state fails to fulfil the aspirations of a particular region, necessitating a recalibration of internal power-sharing mechanisms. Such federalism serves as a middle ground between integration and secession, although its effectiveness depends heavily on whether authority is equitably distributed (Stepan, 2001). Catalonia in Spain and Quebec in Canada exemplify this approach, having secured autonomy rights within existing federal arrangements. However, tensions with Catalonia highlight the limitations of asymmetrical federalism, wherein the region did not receive adequate autonomy within the prevailing system (Guibernau, 2013). In India, the special status once granted to Jammu and Kashmir—prior to its revocation in 2019—offers another example of functional federalism.

Peaceful separatism refers to efforts toward secession through constitutional and democratic processes such as referenda or international diplomacy. This path depends on legal legitimacy and political support both domestically and internationally, allowing a region to pursue independence without resorting to violence (Keating, 2001). Scotland and Czechoslovakia provide important examples. Scotland's 2014 independence referendum was a democratic mechanism to express political aspirations without violence (Tierney, 2012). Similarly, the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993 demonstrates how separation can occur through nonviolent means, with both resulting states gaining international recognition.

Militant or armed separatism is a more radical and non-democratic approach in which a region seeks independence through violence. Central governments are often seen as internal colonial powers that neglect the rights of such regions. This phenomenon frequently arises in contexts of long-standing structural injustice and repeated human rights violations (Toft, 2003). Clear examples include the Free Papua Movement (OPM) in Indonesia and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka. In Papua, for instance, state violence and socio-economic neglect by the Indonesian government have reinforced separatist identity (Chauvel, & Bhakti, 2004). Such movements risk escalating into civil wars and major humanitarian crises.

Liberation demands can also lead to internationalization, where global communities are called upon to recognize independence claims or condemn human rights violations by the central government. These efforts often involve engagement with international institutions such as the UN, ICC, or global NGOs. Diaspora mobilization and international media campaigns are frequently used to globalize these issues (Caspersen, 2012). Timor-

Leste represents a successful case of issue internationalization, having garnered international support following the exposure of mass human rights abuses after the 1999 referendum (Chesterman, 2001). With robust international backing, Timor-Leste ultimately gained its independence in 2002.

Several factors drive these regions to demand liberation, including economic and political marginalization, ethnic or cultural discrimination, and systemic human rights violations. Additionally, the absence of effective participatory channels in national politics and inspiration from other successful independence movements contribute to the strength of these demands. The international community often supports the principle of self-determination primarily in cases of decolonization or grave human rights violations. States with internal separatist movements themselves tend to reject such claims abroad in order to uphold the principle of non-intervention and regional stability.

The issue of regional liberation sits at the intersection of the principle of self-determination and state sovereignty, creating a dilemma for the international community when determining their position. In postcolonial international relations theory, postcolonial states often reproduce colonial practices against peripheral regions—an act termed internal colonization (Said, 1978; Mamdani, 2001). The theory highlights that while a state may have achieved formal independence, colonialism persists in the form of political, economic, and cultural domination by the central state over peripheral territories (Fanon, 1963; Memmi, 1965). In modern states, the central government frequently maintains colonial structures over peripheral areas still considered part of the nation (Grosfoguel, 2007).

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study approach to analyse the non-state diplomatic strategies employed by subaltern communities in three regions: Papua (Indonesia), Catalonia (Spain), and Kurdistan (Iraq and its surrounding areas). These three cases were purposively selected based on several conceptual and empirical considerations: (1) each region experiences forms of internal colonialism reproduced by postcolonial or central states; (2) all exhibit active digital diplomacy dynamics and diaspora mobilisation; and (3) they represent distinct geopolitical configurations—Southeast Asia, Western Europe, and the Middle East—thus allowing for a rich comparative analysis.

The qualitative comparative case study approach is a research method used to analyze several relevant cases with the goal of comparing similarities and differences in the phenomenon under investigation. This approach emphasizes a deep understanding of each case, considering various factors that shape the outcomes of the phenomenon, such as the social, cultural, economic, and political context of each case (Yin, 2018). Through this approach, researchers collect and analyze qualitative data—such as in-depth interviews, observations, and document studies—to gain a deeper understanding of the issues at hand (Stake, 1995).

The main characteristic of this approach is the profound understanding of each case being compared, allowing the researcher to explore the factors that play a role in shaping the results of the phenomenon. Researchers also use existing theories to compare findings across cases and test emerging hypotheses (George & Bennett, 2005). Furthermore, this approach has the potential to lead to the development of new theories or enrich existing theories through empirical findings from the analyzed cases (Ragin, 2000).

In practice, the comparative case study approach begins with selecting relevant cases, followed by data collection through interviews or observations. Afterward, the researcher analyzes the collected data using comparative techniques to identify patterns or themes that emerge, while linking them to existing theories (Gerring, 2007). This process is then concluded by synthesizing the findings, comparing, and contrasting the various cases, which not only provides deeper insight but also contributes to the development of related theories or policies. This approach is used in various types of research and is particularly relevant in the analysis of social conflicts, such as comparing the roles of state and non-state actors in conflicts in Papua, Catalonia, and Kurdistan (Kingsbury & Fernandes, 2005; Gunter, 2011).

Although this approach provides deep understanding and flexibility in exploring various dynamics, there are several limitations, such as difficulty in generalizing findings, given the highly specific context of each case. Additionally, the subjectivity of the researcher in interpreting data can be a challenge, potentially adding bias to the analysis (Stake, 1995). Another limitation is scalability, as this approach tends to focus on a small number of cases, making it less efficient for analyzing phenomena on a larger scale.

However, despite these limitations, the comparative case study approach remains a highly valuable research method for delving into a deeper understanding of complex and dynamic social phenomena. This approach provides space for researchers to explore specific aspects of social phenomena that may not be revealed through other research methods and contributes to the development of more inclusive, context-based social theories and policies.

Data were obtained through literature review and secondary documentation collected from January 2022 to December 2024. Sources include official documents from international organisations (such as the United Nations, the European Union, and the Melanesian Spearhead Group), reports from international non-governmental organisations (including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Asia Pacific Report), as well as articles from credible media outlets documenting the development of subaltern diplomacy in each region.

In addition, digital activity mapping was conducted by tracing content produced and disseminated by diaspora communities and local activists through social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. The selection criteria for digital content included: (1) narratives articulating resistance to central state domination; (2) content

highlighting human rights violations or advocating for self-determination; and (3) the level of reach and online engagement as indicators of discursive resonance.

The analysis employed thematic and discursive approaches to explore how subaltern communities construct counter-narratives, reproduce transnational solidarities, and utilise digital spaces as arenas of symbolic contestation against an international order still biased toward state sovereignty. Through this approach, the study aims to highlight the practice of post-sovereign diplomacy as a form of epistemic and political resistance within contemporary diplomacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The postcolonial approach offers a critical lens to understand that colonialism does not always originate from external powers. In many cases, postcolonial states reproduce colonial practices against peripheral communities. Papua, Catalonia, and Kurdistan are concrete examples in which struggles for liberation are rooted in the rejection of central domination—economically, culturally, and politically.

International organisations, in many cases, have failed to serve as effective channels for subaltern communities to claim their rights. The principle of sovereignty is often prioritised over justice and self-determination. A postcolonial approach helps to deconstruct the rhetoric of diplomatic neutrality and reveals that power—rather than morality—often underlies responses to liberation demands. The failures of international organizations to serve subaltern communities explored below. International organizations such as the United Nations (UN), World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Trade Organization (WTO) have been widely criticized for their failure to act as effective channels through which subaltern communities—including Indigenous peoples, Global South populations, and vulnerable groups—can claim their rights. This failure stems from elitist power structures, state-centrism, and systemic biases favoring the interests of wealthy nations (Chimni, 2006; Tricontinental Institute, 2025).

At the UN, despite symbolic progress such as the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), Indigenous groups remain excluded from decision-making power. Forums like the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues are advisory and non-binding in nature (UNPFII, 2023). Development or conservation projects endorsed by the UN have continued to proceed without the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) of affected communities, resulting in displacement and violence (UNPFII, 2023).

The World Bank faces sharp criticism for financing development projects that displace millions without adequate consultation. According to an investigation by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), approximately 3.4 million people lost land or livelihoods due to World Bank–funded projects between 2004 and 2013 (ICIJ, 2015). In the case of the Sengwer Indigenous people in Kenya, a Bank-funded project contributed to

forced evictions and house burnings, in direct violation of its own safeguard policies (ICIJ, 2015). Internal accountability mechanisms such as the Inspection Panel are often toothless, as they cannot enforce remedial actions (Cultural Survival, 2023).

The IMF, while not financing physical infrastructure, imposes conditionalities that disproportionately harm the poor. A 2023 Human Rights Watch report found that over 80% of recent IMF lending programs included austerity measures that undermined economic and social rights, such as cuts to subsidies and regressive tax increases (Human Rights Watch, 2023). These policies have reduced access to public services like healthcare and education for vulnerable populations.

The WTO has also been criticized for enforcing trade rules that benefit the Global North at the expense of developing nations. While developing countries are pressured to liberalize their economies, wealthier nations maintain massive agricultural subsidies. This has severely disadvantaged small-scale farmers and workers in the Global South (Oxfam, 2002). Moreover, the WTO's decision-making process is notoriously exclusive, with so-called "Green Room" negotiations often limited to a handful of powerful states (Kwa, 2003).

In essence, these institutions have failed due to a combination of tokenistic consultation processes, land rights violations, limited representation, and weak accountability. Subaltern groups remain objects rather than subjects of global development. Without structural reform—including democratization of decision-making, enforceable human rights standards, and formal recognition of grassroots voices—global institutions will continue to reinforce longstanding patterns of inequality (Roy, 2004; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Papua: Internal Colonialism within a Postcolonial State

Papua is frequently cited as a classic case of internal colonialism within a postcolonial state. Following its controversial integration into Indonesia via the 1969 Act of Free Choice—widely deemed illegitimate by international observers (Saltford, 2003)—Papua has endured economic marginalization, militarisation, and cultural erasure (Chauvel, 2004). From a postcolonial perspective, Indonesia—once colonised by the Dutch—now acts as a new coloniser (Ballard, 2002). The Indonesian nation-state, under the concept of "national unity," has marginalized Papuan Melanesian identity and historical rights. As Kirsch (2002) observes, "The Indonesian state-building project in Papua replicates the civilising mission of European colonialism" (p. 75).

Papua exemplifies how international diplomacy has failed to protect the right to self-determination. Within a postcolonial framework, the 1969 Act of Free Choice is seen as a "pseudo-referendum" conducted under military pressure and limited oversight (Saltford, 2003). The UN's acceptance of the result ultimately legitimised Indonesian control over Papua. Since then, Papuan groups have raised the issue in international forums such as the UN Human Rights Council, the Pacific Islands Forum, and the Melanesian Spearhead

Group. Nevertheless, formal support for Papua remains limited due to Indonesia's strategic role in ASEAN and the G20 (Kingsbury, 2019). As Webster (2010) argues, "The UN's acceptance of Indonesia's claim to Papua reflects a colonial logic that prioritises order over justice" (p. 147).

The Papuan diaspora in the Netherlands, Australia, and the South Pacific plays a critical role in bringing the issue to international attention. They use social media to disseminate narratives of violence and marginalization by the central state. Digital campaigns such as #FreeWestPapua leverage platforms like Twitter and YouTube to raise awareness of human rights violations (Kusumaryati, 2021). This online activism constitutes a form of counter-diplomacy challenging Indonesia's official narrative. According to Kusumaryati (2021), "Papuan youth and diaspora online activism represents an emerging form of counter-diplomacy" (p. 178).

Benny Wenda, based in the United Kingdom, plays a prominent and sustained role in advancing the West Papuan self-determination movement on the global stage. As a political exile and leader of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP), Wenda has utilised his diasporic position to engage in diplomatic advocacy, raise human rights concerns, and construct counter-narratives to the dominant state discourse propagated by Indonesia. His efforts—often supported by his family—extend beyond traditional lobbying to include strategic use of international media, engagement with parliamentary and civil society actors in Europe, and participation in global Indigenous rights networks. The Wenda family has become symbolic of the broader Papuan diaspora's resilience and agency, acting as transnational intermediaries who translate local grievances into global diplomatic language (Adamson, 2012; Wahyuningtyas, 2024). Through this work, Wenda exemplifies what scholars have termed post-sovereign diplomacy—a form of non-state, narrative-based international engagement that challenges the normative exclusion of subaltern groups from formal diplomatic spaces (Sassen, 2006; Grovogui, 2002). His ability to sustain visibility in the UK, gain support from political figures, and mobilise solidarity networks across the Global North reflects the increasingly critical role of diaspora activism in shaping the international dimensions of internal self-determination conflicts.

Various liberation movements have emerged over the years to demand greater autonomy or complete independence for Papua. These movements, though diverse in their methods and ideologies, share a common goal of advocating for the rights of the Papuan people and challenging the legitimacy of Indonesian control over the region. They are:

The Free Papua Organization (OPM) is the most well-known and historically significant group advocating for Papua's independence. Founded in 1963, the OPM emerged in the aftermath of the controversial 1969 Act of Free Choice, which Papuan independence groups argue was carried out under duress and did not reflect the true will of the people (START, (n.d.) The OPM initially began as an armed resistance group and became known for its guerrilla warfare tactics against Indonesian forces. Despite the Indonesian

government labelling it a "terrorist" organization, the OPM continues to be a symbol of Papuan resistance to this day. The group has consistently called for a referendum on independence, similar to the process that led to East Timor's independence in 2002 (McDonald, 2002). OPM's actions have included ambushes, kidnappings, and attacks on Indonesian military personnel, as well as more non-violent activities such as protests and political campaigns. The Indonesian government, in response, has implemented military crackdowns, leading to widespread human rights abuses, including forced displacements, arbitrary arrests, and extrajudicial killings (Saltford, 2003). While the OPM's methods are often violent, its role as a symbol of Papuan nationalism and independence cannot be understated.

In contrast to the militant tactics of OPM, the West Papua National Committee (KNPB) was established in 2008 as a non-violent, political movement advocating for the rights of the Papuan people. KNPB's mission is to pursue independence through peaceful means, organizing demonstrations, political campaigns, and engaging in diplomacy to draw international attention to the plight of the Papuans. The KNPB has played a crucial role in advocating for human rights in Papua, frequently highlighting issues such as the ongoing repression of free speech, the restriction of political assemblies, and the unjust treatment of indigenous Papuans by Indonesian authorities (Heller, 2014). Despite its commitment to non-violence, KNPB leaders and activists have been subjected to arbitrary arrests and imprisonment by Indonesian authorities. The group's attempts to engage in peaceful protests and demand greater autonomy have often been met with violent repression, with the Indonesian military routinely dispersing crowds and arresting activists (Musgrave, 2015).

A more recent development in the Papuan liberation struggle is the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP), formed in 2014. ULMWP aims to unite the various pro-independence factions under a single umbrella organization, representing Papuans in their efforts to gain recognition on the global stage. ULMWP unites the three main organisations who have long struggled for independence in their own way, including the Federal Republic of West Papua (NRFPB), National Coalition for Liberation (WPNCL) and West Papua National Parliament (PNWP). An Executive Committee consisting of six elected members from the various groups co-ordinates ULMWP activities, supported by the Council Committee (formerly known as the Board Committee) consisted of three elected members. The Council Committee helps to preside over the structure of ULMWP (ulmwp, (n.d.)

The ULMWP has garnered significant support from the Pacific Islands Forum and other international bodies, pushing for Papua's right to self-determination and calling for a referendum similar to the one that led to the independence of East Timor (MacLeod, 2011). ULMWP's approach has been largely diplomatic, focusing on lobbying international organizations, such as the United Nations, and rallying support for Papua's independence. This strategy has been a shift away from armed resistance towards peaceful advocacy and

international solidarity. While the movement has made some strides in garnering international recognition, it faces immense challenges in terms of international support for its cause, especially given Indonesia's geopolitical importance in Southeast Asia.

Catalonia: Cultural Subjugation within a Modern State

Catalonia, although part of a democratic and developed Spain, challenges the dominant "Spanish" identity narrative and asserts the right to self-determination. Since the Franco era, the Catalan language and culture have been suppressed, and this legacy persists today (Conversi, 1997). From a postcolonial standpoint, Castilian dominance in Spanish national identity reflects a form of epistemic violence—the imposition of a singular narrative of identity and history (Spivak, 1988). As Guibernau (2013) notes, "The Catalonia case reveals the limits of liberal democratic states in accommodating subaltern identities" (p. 372).

In 2017, the Catalan government held an independence referendum declared illegal by Spain's Constitutional Court. Although supported by a majority of voters, the European Union refused to recognise the result, calling it an "internal matter of Spain" (Geerlings, 2021). From a postcolonial perspective, this refusal reflects that even democratic states can subordinate such aspirations to the logic of the status quo and geopolitical interests (Crameri, 2015). As Gillespie (2017) states, "The EU's silence illustrates its limited commitment to self-determination and human rights" (p. 90).

The Catalan diaspora across EU member states and North America mobilises public and elite opinion through public diplomacy campaigns. Social media is used effectively by leaders like Carles Puigdemont to build a resistance narrative and garner international sympathy. Yet, the EU continues to reject the legitimacy of the 2017 referendum, reaffirming its position on national sovereignty. This demonstrates the limits of non-state diplomacy in a state-centric international system. As Crameri (2015) points out, "Catalan activists have adapted global digital tools to articulate a cosmopolitan nationalist agenda" (p. 117).

Catalonia, located in northeastern Spain, has a long history of seeking greater autonomy and independence. This struggle intensified in the 21st century, driven by dissatisfaction with the central government's policies and a desire to protect Catalonia's distinct cultural and political identity. The modern independence movement gained traction after the 2006 reform of the Statute of Autonomy, which was later partially invalidated by Spain's Constitutional Court in 2010. This legal setback led to increased support for independence, particularly among political parties like Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC) and Junts per Catalunya.

The 2017 Catalan independence referendum marked a pivotal moment, with the Catalan government pushing forward with the vote despite its illegality according to Spain's constitutional court. Despite a violent response from Spanish authorities, the referendum showed overwhelming support for independence. However, the Spanish government invoked Article 155 of the Constitution, suspending Catalonia's autonomy and taking direct

control. This move, along with subsequent arrests of leaders, deepened the political crisis. Civil society organizations, such as the Assemblea Nacional Catalana (ANC) and Òmnium Cultural, have been key in organizing peaceful protests and advocating for Catalonia's right to self-determination. Despite challenges from the Spanish state and limited international support, the independence movement remains strong, with political and social leaders continuing to fight for Catalonia's autonomy.

Kurdistan: Transnational Subalternity and Fragmented Resistance

Kurdistan, spread across Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, has no formal recognition as a state, despite its strong historical, cultural, and linguistic identity. Its independence efforts have frequently been suppressed militarily and legally (Gunter, 2011). In the postcolonial frame, Kurds are a subaltern community colonised not only by Western imperialism but also by regional postcolonial powers that reject identity pluralism (Yıldız, 2005). As Natali (2005) puts it, "Kurds occupy a space of multiple marginalities: geographic, cultural, and discursive" (p. 142).

The Kurdish case is more complex due to the involvement of multiple transnational actors. In Iraq, Kurds gained substantial autonomy following the 1991 Gulf War, supported by international intervention and a U.S.-backed no-fly zone (Romano, 2006). However, the 2017 independence referendum faced strong opposition from Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and even the United States. The UN also withheld support, citing regional stability concerns. This underscores the selectivity in applying the principle of self-determination—frequently criticised by postcolonial scholars (Natali, 2010). As Bengio (2014) notes, "Kurds are useful to global powers when convenient but abandoned when their aspirations threaten regional order" (p. 109).

The Kurdish diaspora plays a vital role in building transnational solidarity through media and international human rights organisations (Bengio, 2014; Natali, 2010). Digital strategies are used to highlight resistance against ISIS and position Kurds as global human rights defenders. However, these strategies are often co-opted by major powers like the U.S. and discarded once strategic goals are met (Romano, 2006). As Natali (2010) states, "Kurdish digital diplomacy swings between visibility and neglect by Western powers" (p. 97).

Kurdistan, spanning across Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, has long been a focal point of Kurdish liberation movements advocating for autonomy and independence. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), founded in 1978, is the most prominent group fighting for Kurdish rights, initially seeking an independent state and later focusing on autonomy and cultural rights within Turkey. The PKK's armed resistance, though labelled as terrorist activities by various countries, gained significant support from Kurdish communities, especially in Syria, where its offshoot, the People's Defense Units (YPG), played a pivotal role in the fight against ISIS. In Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) gained a degree of autonomy after the 1991 Gulf War, and a 2017 referendum overwhelmingly supported

independence, though Baghdad rejected the result. In Syria, Kurdish groups, including the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), have established autonomous zones despite opposition from Turkey. In Iran, Kurdish movements like the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) have struggled for autonomy, facing violent suppression from the Iranian government. Throughout the region, Kurdish movements have fought not only for political autonomy but also for cultural recognition, particularly the preservation of the Kurdish language and identity. Despite facing repression, these movements continue to seek greater self-determination, with varying degrees of support from the international community.

Subaltern Diplomacy in the Context of International Relations (IR)

In contrast to Catalonia and Kurdistan, which pursue their political aspirations within the relatively open frameworks of liberal democratic systems—despite inherent limitations—Papua operates within a significantly more restricted diplomatic environment. The Indonesian state maintains firm control over international representations of the Papuan issue, particularly within multilateral forums such as the United Nations. This asymmetrical discursive landscape marks Papua's uniqueness: its diplomacy evolves not in an enabling institutional context, but under conditions of systemic constraint. Within this environment, digital diplomacy and the transnational activism of the Papuan diaspora assume heightened strategic importance as counter-hegemonic instruments (Spivak, 1988; Castells, 2015).

Geographically situated in the Asia-Pacific—a region shaped by great power rivalries, contested regionalism, and intensifying diplomatic alignments—Papua occupies a critical intersection between regional geopolitics and subaltern resistance. The emergence of digital campaigns such as #FreeWestPapua does not merely reflect attempts to garner global sympathy. Rather, such initiatives serve to contest state-centric narratives, amplify alternative voices from the Global South, and establish symbolic legitimacy within transnational civil society spaces (Adamson, 2012; Wahyuningtyas, 2024).

Evidence of regional solidarity is visible in the reactions of Papua New Guineans (PNG) on various social media platforms. The manner in which PNG citizens respond to digital content disseminated by Papuan, Catalan, or Kurdish activist networks suggests an underlying current of empathetic identification—despite the lack of formal state-level endorsement. Such engagement reflects the moral resonance of Papua's claims within Melanesian communities and signals the potential for grassroots regionalism in the Pacific (Tebay, 2010).

Significantly, the role of the Papuan diaspora has received increased visibility through political gestures from regional actors. For example, the Governor of Port Moresby—a vocal supporter of West Papua's right to self-determination—extended an invitation to the Papuan diaspora to participate in Papua New Guinea's 50th independence anniversary celebrations. This symbolic act raises important questions regarding its potential impact on PNG–Indonesia bilateral relations.

At the strategic level, Indonesia has supported both PNG and Timor-Leste's aspirations to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as full member states. These countries, while sympathetic to Papua's cause, have adopted cautious diplomatic postures, seeking to balance regional solidarity with their bilateral commitments to Indonesia. In PNG's case, adherence to the Treaty of Mutual Respect, Friendship, and Cooperation signed with Indonesia remains a critical framework for maintaining diplomatic cordiality and avoiding escalatory tensions.

Thus, Papua's post-sovereign diplomacy must be understood not only through the lens of internal colonialism, but also in relation to regional diplomatic calculations, treaty-based obligations, and geopolitical alignments. The interplay between grassroots movements, diaspora activism, and strategic state interests in the Asia-Pacific highlights both the potential and limitations of subaltern diplomacy under contemporary global order constraints.

Table 2. Comparation of Papua, Catalonia, and Kurdistan in Subaltern Diplomacy

Dimension	Papua	Catalonia	Kurdistan
Political Status	Postcolonial territory within Indonesia	Autonomous region in democratic Spain	Autonomous zones across Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Turkey
Diplomatic Challenge	Strong state suppression; no formal recognition	European legal-political dismissal of referendum	Tactical support abandoned post-referendum
Diaspora Role	Small, symbolic, active via NGOs and UN channels	Large, resourceful diaspora in Europe/US	Widespread, militarily and politically engaged diaspora
Digital Media Strategy	#FreeWestPapua, visual testimonies, human rights reports	#CatalanReferendum, online news, civic tech apps	#KurdistanIndependence, multilingual campaigns, media lobbying
State Repression	Surveillance, militarization, criminalization of dissent	Legal prosecution, political imprisonment	Targeted military attacks and cross-border repression
Domestic Political System	Electoral authoritarianism (Indonesia)	Liberal democracy (Spain)	Hybrid regimes, semi-authoritarian (Turkey, Iran)
International Legitimacy	Low; often blocked by ASEAN and UN diplomacy	High visibility, low formal support	Momentary support during crises, little long-term recognition
Narrative Content	Decolonization, Melanesian identity, human rights violation	Democratic self-determination, cultural rights	Ethnonationalism, anti-terrorism struggle, betrayal narratives

Source: Summarised by the author from the discussion

Critique of a State-Centric International Order

The three cases illustrate how digital media and diaspora activism open new diplomatic spaces for subaltern communities. However, the Westphalian international system continues to privilege state actors over non-state ones (Grovogui, 2002; Acharya, 2014). Global governance institutions, such as the UN and regional blocs, remain selective and interest-driven in supporting liberation movements, typically aligning their positions with the geopolitical interests of dominant states (Cox, 1987; Mamdani, 2020). For example, international sympathy for Kurdistan during its anti-ISIS efforts vanished once it declared independence, while Catalonia's referendum was dismissed outright by EU institutions (Keating, 2019).

Epistemic Violence and Diplomacy under Repressive Conditions

Papua's case reveals multiple layers of marginalization—economic, political, and epistemic. The narrative of Indonesian national integration actively suppresses Papua's Melanesian identity and right to self-determination, exemplifying what Spivak (1988) termed epistemic violence. Unlike Catalonia and Kurdistan, which operate within semi-democratic contexts, Papua is silenced within a postcolonial state apparatus that itself resists colonial accusations (Rumbiak, & Wainggai, 2001; Kirsch, 2007). This demonstrates how the global order continues to obscure internal colonialism within postcolonial polities (Nair, 2013).

Diaspora as Agents of Transnational Diplomacy

Diaspora communities function not only as political brokers but also as transnational public diplomats, capable of mobilising moral legitimacy and forging international solidarity (Adamson, 2012; Ragazzi, 2009). The Papuan diaspora, while smaller than its Kurdish or Catalan counterparts, increasingly operates as a symbolic force through digital campaigns like #FreeWestPapua, testimony videos, and advocacy at Pacific Islands Forum meetings (Kusumaryati, 2021; Tebay, 2010). However, diaspora effectiveness often depends on access to digital infrastructure, funding, and global media engagement (Brinkerhoff, 2009).

Digital Media: Empowerment and Contestation

Digital media platforms offer new venues for counter-hegemonic narratives. Hashtags such as #FreeWestPapua, #CatalanReferendum, and #KurdistanIndependence globalize local struggles, operating as tools of narrative warfare against state-controlled discourse (Castells, 2015; Cammaerts, 2015). Yet the digital sphere is contested: states employ surveillance, bots, and cyber repression to delegitimize subaltern claims (Morozov, 2011; Tufekci, 2017). This reflects how even digital diplomacy is embedded in asymmetrical global power relations.

Theoretical Implications for IR

These cases embody post-sovereign diplomacy—diplomatic practices operating outside formal state structures through moral, symbolic, and digital channels. This disrupts classical IR theories that rely on state-centrism and diplomatic immunity (Sassen, 2006; Walker, 1993). Subaltern and diaspora actors must be seen as agents of global order transformation, capable of influencing norms, narratives, and institutional behavior through persistent symbolic diplomacy (Tickner & Sjoberg, 2013). Digital infrastructure is both a site of empowerment and surveillance. While it enables marginal voices to reach transnational audiences, it also exposes them to new forms of algorithmic suppression and digital authoritarianism (Tufekci, 2017; Milan, 2015).

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that international diplomacy, particularly within postcolonial contexts, remains largely dominated by state-centric and geopolitical logics. Subaltern communities such as those in Papua, Catalonia, and Kurdistan continue to face structural barriers in achieving recognition, despite their strategic use of digital media and diaspora networks. Under these conditions, post-sovereign diplomacy has emerged as a counter-hegemonic practice that seeks to contest dominant narratives through symbolic, digital, and transnational means.

The research underscores the importance of diaspora communities and digital platforms as critical tools in navigating restricted diplomatic spaces. These actors and instruments not only amplify subaltern voices but also challenge the exclusionary norms of the current international system. While the normative international order remains biased toward states, subaltern actors are actively reshaping the contours of diplomacy from below. In reaffirming these findings, the study contributes both theoretically and practically to the discourse on subaltern diplomacy. It highlights the urgent need for inclusive, justice-oriented approaches in international relations that recognise the legitimacy of non-state diplomatic actors operating within postcolonial structures of power.

This study also calls upon scholars and practitioners of international relations to broaden the horizon of diplomatic studies and practice. Greater attention is needed toward non-state diplomacy—particularly post-sovereign diplomacy—as a form of contestation against state hegemony in global diplomacy. This area deserves to be recognised as a strategic field within contemporary international relations. Furthermore, it is essential to open space for alternative narratives originating from subaltern communities themselves. Higher education institutions and research centres must foster collaboration with diaspora communities, support multilingual education, and develop digital archiving platforms as mediums for the articulation of subaltern voices globally.

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