

Self-determination for Balochistan

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Last week, three Republicans (Dana Rohrabacher, Louie Gohmert, and Steve King) sponsored a bill “recognizing Baluchistan’s right to self-determination.” This sparked widespread condemnation by the Pakistani ruling and military class (who saw the maneuver as meddling in internal politics) and enthusiastic support from several voices in Balochistan (who saw the resolution and the hearings that preceded it as evidence that their case was finally getting a hearing in the west). The problem is that the Balochi right to self-determination is being caught in the same ambush which trapped the Kurds in Iraq: the weakness of their position vis-à-vis Pakistan is forcing them into a compromise with American imperialism, which has already shown itself no great ally of national liberation struggles.

The Obama administration and leading Republicans were quick to distance themselves from the resolution; the establishment line continues to be that Pakistan is more important as an ally than as an enemy. David Dreier (R-CA) spoke to Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani to assure him that the US is fully behind the national integrity of Pakistan. All mention of the Pakistani government’s role in the horrors in Balochistan was quickly swept under the rug. At the same time, the bill is the latest salvo in the Pakistan-bashing which has been commonplace in the US as an explanation for the Afghan quagmire, the seemingly endless sources of Islamists, and the like; Rohrabacher’s bill is part of a small but vocal line of thought which sees the break-up of Pakistan as important to the “war on terror” and the coming conflict with Iran.

The fight between Christine Fair and Rohrabacher reveals some of the thinking that is behind this resolution. The real injustices done to the Baloch people are being used as sticks with which the Pakistani establishment will be humbled. In fact, offhand comments by members of Rohrabacher’s staff were picked up by the Pakistani press; one of them was overheard saying that the resolution was an opportunity to “stick it to the Pakistanis.” One suspects, too, that the decision to support the Baloch cause was opportunistic; there has been so little debate and discussion about the longstanding grievances of the Balochis in the US.

As Praveen Swami recently reported, the Pakistani military has long conducted a dirty war in Balochistan: assassinations, rape, collective punishment, disappearances. Since the establishment of Pakistan, there has been a dominant strain of Baloch politics which sought independence from Pakistan; there is also a strain which has been coopted into the establishment of Pakistan which prefers unity over independence. The Baloch Liberation Army is only the most recent formation under which the Baloch organized themselves to fight the Pakistani military.

Almost immediately, the Pakistani government cut a deal with Baloch leaders who were living in exile, presumably so that they could both pacify restive Balochis and re-establish connections to erstwhile allies. A package of economic reforms was also announced for Balochistan:

INCENTIVES: The meeting decided that the federal government will release Rs4 billion to the Water and Power Development Authority on account of its share of subsidy for farmers of Balochistan.

A total of 15,000 graduates and post-graduates from the province will be given jobs under the prime minister’s Internship Programme.

They will work as schoolteachers and get a stipend of Rs15,000 per month.

About 2,400 federal government jobs will be filled on merit with the assistance of members of the National Assembly and Senate from Balochistan.

The meeting decided to award one-step promotion to any officer coming to Islamabad from the province on deputation.

It also decided to double the number of beneficiaries of the Benazir Income Support Programme to 750,000.

The strength of Federal Levies Force will be raised from 3,500 to 6,500 through fresh recruitment.

The meeting decided to increase the number of brilliant students from Balochistan to 500 from 150 for providing free education to them with effect from the next academic year and to create an endowment fund of Rs5 billion to sustain the programme.

The Capital Development Authority will allot plots to the Balochistan government for construction of two hostels for students and officers in Islamabad.

The Frontier Corps will not be move in any district without the permission of the deputy commissioner and will not set up any check-post without the approval of the chief minister.

Confident that it has the ear of the west, the Baloch Republican Party rejected the package and praised the Republican congressmen for their support. While American imperialist interest and Balochi national interest may move in similar directions for a while, they will necessarily diverge as Balochistan is asked to be the military-base-of-the-month (which is the only way, it seems, that independence happens with American backing) against Iran and Pakistan. This is not the preferred option for the American ruling class, but it's hard to imagine that either Santorum or Romney doesn't start picking up this line in the debates very soon.

The Committee of Progressive Pakistani-Canadians gets the analysis right, I think:

While any publicity about the discrimination and violence faced by Sindhis and the Baloch is to be welcomed long experience, more recently confirmed in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and now in Syria shows that US and western concerns about human rights violations are merely a fig leaf to provide a cover for the naked pursuit of their own selfish imperial interests.

The Pakistani state's unjust and ruthless treatment of the Baloch, even when their elected leadership accepted the constitutional framework adopted during Z.A. Bhutto's government in 1973 in good faith as a step toward equitable relations, is the direct cause of the desire among many Baloch to seek independence; as are repeated 'actions' by the military in the rise of the Baloch armed resistance movement - reminiscent of the Mukti Bahini (Liberation Army) in East Pakistan's war of independence.

P.S.

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