

# Balochistan: Pakistan's internal war

History of an insurgency

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Sommaire

- [Catalyst for war](#)
- [Balochistan's place in \(...\)](#)
- [Plundering Balochistan](#)
- [Development and transmigration](#)
- [Militarisation and Islamisatio](#)
- [Balochistan's history of \(...\)](#)
- [Balochistan's history of \(...\)](#)
- [The current insurgency](#)

Open warfare erupted between Baloch nationalists and the Pakistani military in December 2005 following decades of what the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) described as a “simmering insurgency”. An HRCP investigation conducted in December 2005 and January 2006 detailed ongoing summary executions, disappearances, torture and indiscriminate bombing and artillery attacks against the people of Pakistan's south-western province of Balochistan. Baloch nationalist fighters, mainly from the Bugti and Marri tribes, continue to attack Pakistani military and paramilitary forces and sabotage gas pipelines and other infrastructure on a daily basis.

General Pervez Musharraf's government asserts that the insurgency is an attempt by some tribal chieftains (sardars) to prevent economic development in Balochistan and maintain their traditional power. Baloch nationalists, however, point to the ongoing expropriation of Balochistan's natural resources, exclusion from development projects, political marginalisation, transmigration and continuing militarisation as reasons for the insurgency.

On April 30 the Musharraf regime banned Baloch nationalist leaders from travelling outside Pakistan. On May 1 the Balochistan Liberation Army claimed responsibility for blowing up a railway bridge in the Kohlu district of Balochistan, cutting the line between the provincial capital, Quetta, and Iran. In the same month the Musharaff government banned the BLA as a terrorist organisation. On August 26 the Pakistani military killed Nawab Akbar Bugti, sardar of the Bugti tribe (one of Balochistan's largest tribes) and a leader of the Baloch national liberation movement. Hundreds of people were arrested after rioting erupted throughout Balochistan in response to the killing.

## Catalyst for war

Two incidents are widely recognised as being the catalyst for the current state of open warfare in Balochistan. The rape of a female doctor at Sui hospital by a Pakistani army officer and several soldiers of the Defence Security Guards (DSG — charged with guarding Sui's gas installations) on January 2, 2005, sparked an increase in insurgent attacks. The handling of the rape allegations by the Pakistan government only inflamed the initial sense of outrage.

Dr Shazia Khalid worked for Pakistan Petroleum Limited, which operates the Sui gas fields. Both PPL and the government tried to cover up the rape. The officer accused of the rape was given time on the government-run Pakistan Television to argue his version of events and Musharraf, Pakistan's president,

publicly affirmed the officer's innocence. Khalid was later forced into quasi-exile by the Pakistani regime.

In response to the rape, between January 7-11, militants of the Bugti tribe attacked the Sui gas fields, which produce much of Pakistan's natural gas, causing disruption to supplies for over a month. The government responded with house-to-house searches by 7000 regular troops plus Frontier Corps personnel (FC — a despised paramilitary unit), supported by armour, artillery and gunships. The houses of those "suspected" of launching the attack were bulldozed. More than 1500 insurgent attacks were mounted between January 7 and April 3, 2005, throughout the province, culminating in a pitched battle between the FC and Bugti tribespeople.

The second incident was a December 14, 2005, insurgent rocket attack on an FC camp on the outskirts of Kohlu in the Marri tribal area that Musharraf was visiting. The following day insurgents fired on a helicopter carrying the FC's inspector-general, Major-General Shujaat Zamir Dar, who was injured in the attack. Hours later Pakistani forces launched major attacks on farari camps (rebel bases) in the province.

According to the late Nawab Akbar Bugti, Pakistani military forces in the region increased after December 14 to 50,000 regular army troops and 30,000 FC. By February 2006, some 300 civilians had been killed, including more than 120 children, and 4000 Baloch had been arrested. Accurate information on Pakistani army deployments are difficult to come by as the military continue to deny that large-scale operations are even happening and the region is closed to outside journalists.

These events were, however, only manifestations of the historical treatment of Balochistan by the national government and the response of Baloch nationalists. Baloch nationalism and the grievances of Balochistan stem from a history of exploitation and marginalisation of the Baloch by the central, Punjabi-dominated, federal government.

Key issues for the Baloch national liberation movement include: resource distribution, including jobs for Baloch, and the associated issue of transmigration; the expansion of Pakistani military cantonments and militarisation of the province; and whether independence or autonomy is the aim of the insurgency.

The government's treatment of the Baloch can partly be explained by Balochistan's strategic and economic importance to the Pakistani state.

## **Balochistan's place in the Islamic Republic**

Bordering the Arabian Sea, greater Balochistan is divided among three countries — Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. Pakistan's Balochistan province, located in the south-west, has 43% of Pakistan's territory but only 5% of its population (around 6,500,000 people). It also contains a substantial amount of Pakistan's energy and mineral resources and produces over 40% of the country's primary energy, including almost half of its total gas production. Large deposits of coal, copper, silver, platinum, aluminium, gold and uranium are situated within its borders.

Balochistan is ethnically divided between the Baloch (45%) and the Pashtun (38%), with a further 17% of the population being mixed or other ethnicity. The Pashtun are concentrated in a belt in the north-west of the province roughly stretching between Qila Abdullah near the Afghan border, Quetta and Loralai to the east.

The Ras Koh ranges, near the border with Iran and Afghanistan, is where Pakistan conducts its nuclear tests. A proposed gas pipeline linking Iran, Turkmenistan and India will pass through the province.

Balochistan comprises almost all of Pakistan's coastline — 756 kilometers on the Arabian Sea. It provides Pakistan with an exclusive economic zone of 180,000 square kilometres potentially rich in mineral resources. It is also home to two of Pakistan's three naval bases, one of which, Gwadar, is being developed as an alternative to the base at Karachi in Sindh, which is viewed as vulnerable to the Indian navy. US military operations in southern Afghanistan are launched from bases in Balochistan and both the Taliban

and al Qaeda purportedly operate out of the more remote areas of the province.

Despite being the repository of so much of Pakistan's natural resources and the site of major development projects, Balochistan has benefited little from the exploitation of its wealth.

## **Plundering Balochistan**

A central demand of Baloch nationalists is the equitable sharing of revenue from the province's natural resources. A case in point is Balochistan's production of natural gas, which is crucial to Pakistan's economy. Despite accounting for 36-45% of Pakistan's gas production, the province consumes only 17% of what it produces. The remainder is sold at a much lower price to the rest of the country than gas produced in Punjab and Sindh. That the federal government returns only 12.4% of the gas royalties actually due to the provincial government compounds this inequality.

Gas was discovered in Sui in 1953 and supplied to cities in the Punjab by 1964. The Baloch capital of Quetta only received a gas supply in 1986, and then only because the federal government had decided to station a military garrison there. In total only four of Balochistan's 26 districts have been supplied with gas.

Insurgent attacks on gas pipelines are common and have caused the shutting down of industrial production in the Punjab for lengthy periods.

## **Development and transmigration**

Balochistan is the site of a number of major development projects. A key grievance of Baloch nationalists is the marginalisation of their people from the benefits of these projects.

Gwadar port, on the Arabian Sea near the border with Iran and close to the Strait of Hormuz at the entrance to the Persian Gulf, is being developed with Chinese assistance and epitomises the national government's approach to "development" in the province. Development of Gwadar will provide a port, warehousing and industry to more than 20 countries. Completion is expected in 2010, when the port will be able to receive oil tankers of over 200,000 tonnes. Along with an associated industrial development and free-trade zone, Gwadar will be linked to Central Asia by a road and rail network currently under construction. China has also discussed with Pakistan on the building of a 60,000-barrels-per-day oil refinery at Gwadar.

Almost all the construction contracts were awarded to non-Baloch, mainly Punjabi, firms. Despite thousands of jobless Baloch engineers and technicians being available, only low-grade jobs are offered to Baloch workers. The rest of the positions are filled largely by Punjabi and other non-Baloch workers. Of the 600 personnel that worked on the first stage of construction, only 100 were Baloch, and they were mainly day-labourers. No effort has been made by the central government to train the local population so they can obtain jobs at Gwadar.

Once the Musharraf government's plans for the port are complete, the population of Gwadar and surrounding districts will rise from 70,000 to 2 million, overwhelmingly transforming the ethnic makeup of the region as Punjabi, Sindhi and other workers are moved into the area.

This is not an uncommon situation for areas under development in Balochistan, or in civil administration or the military where Baloch are significantly under-represented. Less than 1% of the 30,000 FC personnel in Balochistan are Baloch and only 3% of the coastguard is ethnic Baloch. Nawab Akbar Bugti articulated the fears of the Baloch people in January 2005 when he accused the Musharraf government of "trying to change the Baloch majority into a minority by accommodating more than five million non-locals in Gwadar and other developed areas".

## **Militarisation and Islamisation**

In order to force this situation onto the Baloch, the federal government has increasingly militarised their province. The large influx of troops from December 2005, when the most recent hostilities erupted, only accelerated this process.

There are military/police roadblocks throughout the province and the Pakistani intelligence service is reportedly creating militias among local opponents of nationalist leaders. The military currently has two cantonments (large military bases) in the province at Quetta and Sibbi.

Of central concern to the nationalists is the stated aim of the federal government to create three more cantonments at Gwadar, Dera Bugti and Kohlu. This measure is viewed by the Baloch as a further attempt to deprive them of the natural resources in those areas and enhance the military's ability to suppress their struggle.

Hand-in-hand with this use of force is an ideological push by the Musharraf regime to break the loyalty of the Baloch to their tribal leaders. The Baloch nationalists are strongly opposed to the influence of the mullahs and also oppose the Taliban (who currently operate out of Balochistan).

The Musharraf regime has attempted to promote Islamic fundamentalism in the province to break the hold of the sardars.

In rigged 2002 provincial elections, the army and government ensured the victory of the fundamentalist Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (United Coalition for Action) in Balochistan and the North-West Frontier Province. Although it no longer holds power there, the MMA is heavily supported in Balochistan by the Musharraf regime.

Through the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MRA), the federal government continues to establish madrassas (religious schools) to bolster the mullahs' influence. The lack of secular education is more noticeable in Balochistan than in any other province, with 50% of children compelled to attend the religious schools. This is not surprising given that the national budget for the MRA is around 1.2 billion rupees whilst the secular education ministry is allocated 200 million. It is leading to what Baloch nationalists call the "Talibanisation" of Balochistan.

Supporting the influence of the mullahs and fundamentalist organisations against the Baloch nationalists has another benefit for Musharraf. It allows him to posture on the world stage and try to convince foreign governments of the risk of the spread of fundamentalism in the region. He has also launched an international disinformation campaign equating the Baloch national struggle with Islamic terrorism and linking nationalist militants with al Qaeda and the Taliban.

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## **Part II**

### **Balochistan's history of insurgency**

Pakistan's south-western province of Balochistan has been the site of an intense struggle for self-determination against the federal government. Despite the province being rich in natural resources, the Baloch remain economically marginalised and receive little benefit from development in Balochistan. In its efforts to counter the Baloch struggle, Pakistan's government has employed summary executions, disappearances, torture and indiscriminate bombing and artillery attack. The first part of this article was published in GLW #692.

The end result of the expropriation of Balochistan's natural resources and the marginalisation of Baloch from development projects is the province's low standard of living. It is the poorest province in Pakistan. According to the Social Policy and Development Centre (SPDC) in Karachi, Balochistan has the highest levels of poverty in Pakistan, nearly double that of the Punjab. Over half the population subsists below the official poverty line, less than 50% have clean drinking water, only 50% of children attend primary school and only 33% of children up to two years old have any form of immunisation. Women's literacy is the lowest in Pakistan, standing at just 7%. The federal government's 2003-04 Labour Force Survey shows urban unemployment of 12.5% in Balochistan compared to 9.7% for Pakistan as a whole. Electricity is supplied to barely 20% of the population.

The Musharraf regime has long blamed the nationalist leaders for Balochistan's underdevelopment, arguing that they are "anti-development". However, research conducted by the SPDC in 2001 shows those areas under control of nationalist leaders, such as the late Nawab Akbar Bugti, Nawab Khair Mari and Sardar Attaullah Mengal, were often better developed. A number of indicators, such as road networks, primary school enrolments, access to clean water and irrigation are often ranked higher than areas aligned to the federal government.

## **Balochistan's history of struggle**

The Baloch have a long history of struggle against impositions by the Pakistani state. Their history, however, pre-dates the formation of Pakistan. The Baloch lay claim to a history reaching back 2000 years. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Mir Jalal Khan united 44 Baloch tribes; in the 15<sup>th</sup> century the Confederation of Rind Laskhari was established and the Khanate of Balochistan in the 17<sup>th</sup>.

During the British Raj, Britain annexed a strip of land adjoining Afghanistan ("British Balochistan") but beyond that did not interfere in the affairs of Balochistan so long as the Baloch allowed the British Army access to Afghanistan. The Baloch campaigned for independence during the final decades of the British Raj but were compelled to join Pakistan in 1947.

The government in Islamabad sought to subsume Baloch identity into a larger Pakistani identity. Part of its strategy was an attempt to destroy the power of the tribal chiefs and concentrate all authority in the central government. This strategy continues to this day. Even the first two constitutions of Pakistan did not recognise the Baloch as a distinct group.

Since independence, Islamabad has come into open conflict with the Baloch on four occasions — 1948, 1958, 1962, and, most bloodily, from 1973 to 1977, when a growing guerrilla movement led to an armed insurrection that ravaged the province.

Within 24 hours of the creation of Pakistan in 1947, the Khan of Kalat (the largest "princely state" in Balochistan) declared independence. On April 1, 1948, the Pakistani army invaded and the Khan capitulated. His brother, Karim, continued to resist with around 700 guerrillas but was soon crushed.

Islamabad merged the four provinces of West Pakistan into "One Unit" in 1954. This was a bid to counter the strength of East Pakistan (which later became Bangladesh) and the possibility of the minority provinces (Balochistan, North-West Frontier Province, Sindh) uniting with the east against the Punjab. A large anti-One Unit movement emerged in Balochistan.

To crush this movement the Pakistan army again invaded. The Khan of Kalat was arrested and large-scale arrests were carried out. Nauroz Khan led a resistance of 1000 militia that fought the army in pitched battles for over a year. In May 1959 Nauroz Khan was arrested at a parley with the army and died in prison in 1964, becoming a symbol of Baloch resistance. Five of his relatives, including his son, were hanged.

Following a 1973 visit of President Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to Iran, where the Shah warned him against allowing nationalist movements on Iran's border, the elected government of Balochistan was dismissed.

The provincial government, led by Sardar Ataulah Mengal, had been seeking greater control in areas of development and industrialisation. The pretext used for dismissal was that a cache of 350 Soviet submachine guns and 100,000 rounds of ammunition had supposedly been discovered in the Iraqi attache's house and were destined for Balochistan.

The Pakistani army invaded Balochistan with 78,000 troops supported by Iranian Cobra helicopters and were resisted by some 50,000 tribespeople. The conflict took the lives of 3300 Pakistani troops, 5300 tribespeople and thousands of civilians. In 1977 the military staged a coup and overthrew Bhutto, declared "victory" in Balochistan and withdrew.

There are distinct similarities between the period immediately prior to the 1973 insurrection and the current situation. After the 1962 conflict Baloch nationalists began planning a movement capable of defending their national interests.

Under the leadership of Sher Mohammed Marri what would later become the basic structure of the 1973 insurrection was created. In July 1963, 22 rebel camps were set up covering large areas of Balochistan, ranging from lands in the south belonging to the Mengal tribes to those of the Marri in the north. This structure later became the Baloch People's Liberation Front (BPLF) and initiated the 1973 insurrection.

### **The current insurgency**

The groupings that underpin the current Baloch national movement emerged gradually after the 1973-77 conflict.

The Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) is a clandestine militant group that was formed in the early 1980s. It is believed to be headed by Khair Bux Marri of the Marri tribe. It has taken responsibility for most of the attacks against the Pakistan military. The BLA calls for the creation of a Greater Balochistan, including the Baloch territories in Iran and Afghanistan.

The Baloch National Party (BNP) is an amalgam of moderate forces that concentrate on winning political support for nationalism amongst the Baloch. It calls for extensive provincial autonomy, limiting the central government to control of defense, foreign affairs, currency, and communications.

The Balochistan Students Organisation (BSO) campaigns for a multinational Pakistan and for the revival of Baloch nationalism. It generally represents the aspirations of the educated but underemployed Baloch middle class. It calls for the continuation of quotas and for the recognition of the Baloch language as a medium of instruction in the province.

The Bugti tribe, formerly led by Nawab Akbar Bugti, fields a force of some 10,000 tribal fighters. The Dera Bugti district has been the site of intense operations by the Pakistan military in 2005-06.

As well as the Bugti tribe, the Mengal (the second largest tribe in Balochistan) and the Marri are in open revolt against the government. The conflict is not, however, limited to these tribal areas but spread throughout the province. There is conflict between the tribes but they are united against the Pakistani army.

Between December 2005, when the Pakistan military launched its most recent assault on Balochistan, and June 2006, more than 900 Baloch have been killed, 140,000 displaced, 450 political activists (mainly from the BNP) disappeared and 4000 activists arrested.

In late 2005-early 2006 the Pakistan military laid siege to Dera Bugti, attacking with artillery and air strikes. Many civilians were killed and 85% of the 25,000-strong population fled. The town of Kohlu also came under siege from Pakistan forces around the same time, virtually imprisoning the 12,000 inhabitants for weeks.

As well as the military attacks, the Frontier Corps (FC) has been responsible for indiscriminate rocket, artillery and helicopter gunship attacks on civilian areas. There has been widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, including schools and houses, particularly in Dera Bugti and Sui districts. Military operations occur throughout the province.

The insurgents, however, strike back on a daily basis. Targeting military and FC personnel, gas and oil pipelines, communications infrastructure and police barracks, the insurgents launch rocket, grenade and mortar attacks. Some areas are heavily mined by the nationalist fighters.

On Pakistan TV on January 10, 2005, President Pervez Musharraf told the Baloch nationalists: "Don't push us ... it is not the 1970s, and this time you won't even know what has hit you." Unfortunately for the president, it is beginning to look exactly like 1973 as the insurgency gathers strength and ties down Pakistan army divisions in guerrilla warfare.

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**P.S.**

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[Part two of this article will appear in GLW #693.]