

The Struggle in Balochistan

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OVER THE ELEVEN years that have elapsed since 9/11, Pakistan has found itself in the headlights of the mainstream press for a few, consistent reasons. International audiences have been instructed to worry earnestly about the country's fate, what with the Army's "double-game" in Afghanistan, drone attacks in the tribal areas, the Taliban-led insurgencies in the northwest, and suicide bombings in its urban centers.

While it's true that the American adventure in Af-Pak has had real effects on Pakistan, these mainstream narratives have never adequately captured the actual political dynamics of the country. There's perhaps no better illustration of this than the fact that the country's most significant armed conflict is not the one in the northwest, but rather the decades-old struggle waged by secular nationalists in the province of Balochistan.

The national question has been of special salience to Pakistani politics since the country was cobbled together in 1947, but in none of the peripheral provinces has the conflict between the center and an oppressed nationality been as pitched or as consistent as it has in Balochistan.

British Rule and Accession

The area that is now Pakistani Balochistan represents an amalgam of territories that the British had cultivated as part of their jostling with Russia in the Great Game of the late 1800s. The key strategic prize here was Afghanistan, over which the British would famously fight three wars, but as several of the access routes into Afghanistan ran through territories inhabited by the Baloch, the British sought to bring them to heel as well.

By the turn of the century, these efforts were successful, and the areas had been carved up to suit their strategic designs. About one-fourth of the territory had been granted to Persia in 1871 and a small strip given to Afghanistan in 1891. The areas incorporated into British India were divided into five regions: British Balochistan, which was centrally-administered, and four principalities, of which Kalat was the most significant. (Harrison 1981, 19)

These were the lands of "indirect rule," where the British transformed select tribal chiefs (sardars) into the "eyes and ears" of the colonial administration. Through the granting of subsidies, institutionalization of inter-tribal councils (jirgas), and construction of a repressive apparatus drawn from tribal levies, the British succeeded in establishing themselves at the head of "a politically fragmented Balochistan with many centers of power." [1]

At best, the Sandeman system, as it became known, froze existing tribal law and practice in place, preventing the likely erosion of old customs with time. At worst, it gave added weight to reactionary institutions, “weakening the sardars’ dependence on tribal support” by making the British their primary patrons. As was true in much of British India, the colonial State’s reliance on these indigenous elites foreclosed significant economic or social transformation. (Axmann 2009, 33)

Consequently, on the eve of independence from British rule, the vast majority of Balochistan’s population remained pitifully poor. A reform committee appointed by the Pakistani government in 1949-1950 recorded that a pitiful 8.6% of the 622,457 inhabitants of Balochistan were literate, and that the total number of “schools of all descriptions” was 210. (Axmann, 210) As late as 1977, average life expectancy in rural parts of the province was 42. (Harrison, 161) Some civilizing mission, that.

While the province remained largely untouched by nationalist agitation as a result of its deliberate underdevelopment, the 1930s and 1940s did see incipient demands on the British regarding Balochistan’s future. The Khan of Kalat, nominally a sovereign authority but in reality only “first among equals” in the sardari system, vainly sought British recognition of his paramountcy over the other sardars. (Axmann, 105-107)

There were also the stirrings of more authentic nationalist demands in the formation of the Anjuman-e Ittehad-e Balochan wa Balochistan and the Kalat State National Party, who both condemned the Sandeman system as the chief impediment to the region’s modernization. (Axmann, 144-160) But none of these outlets acquired any kind of mass character prior to independence. “Decades of British indirect rule... [had] effectively prevented the emergence of modern forms of social or political organization on a non-tribal basis.” (Axmann, 155)

The accession of Balochistan to Pakistan, then, was effected entirely over the heads of the Baloch masses. The areas directly controlled by the British (areas acquired from Afghanistan, and areas leased to the British by the Khan) became part of Pakistan after an (allegedly manipulated) vote of hereditary tribal chiefs in June 1947. (Axmann, 195-198)

The incorporation of the principalities proved more complicated. The Khan of Kalat had formally acquired the right to decide his confederacy’s fate upon independence. But his lack of actual sovereignty over the other territories proved important, as the Pakistani government compelled pliable sardars in Kharan, Las Bela, and Makran to sign instruments of accession in March 1948. (Axmann, 232)

The result was to leave the Khan of Kalat “high and dry,” and he too agreed to accede to Pakistan on the 30th of March, 1948. This, it bears noting, contravened the mandate of the Parliament the Khan had institutionalized upon Kalat’s “independence,” both houses of which had rejected merging Kalat with Pakistan. (Axmann, 230-231)

Rule by Pakistan

Unsurprisingly, the highly antidemocratic character of Balochistan’s accession to Pakistan laid the basis for future conflict. This had its echoes in other parts of Pakistan as well.

After all, some limited success in the later years of British rule notwithstanding, the Muslim League had never managed to build a mass base in the regions that came to comprise Pakistan. This was the proximate cause of the alacrity with which the Pakistani ruling-class would turn to authoritarianism soon after independence. In Balochistan, in particular, the League had been singularly unsuccessful

at cultivating the support of the local Baloch, which had set the stage for the clash between the central state and the province in 1947-1948. (Axmann, 166)

The province would not hold its first free elections until 1970. For Pakistan's ruling class, however, it mattered little that the Pakistan project resonated minimally in Balochistan. From their perspective, its inclusion in the Pakistani state was non-negotiable. Despite various intimations that the province would enjoy autonomy within the federation, Balochistan remained of incalculable importance. Although very sparsely populated, its strategic and economic value was indisputable.

The region bordered both Iran and Afghanistan, and its access to the sea potentially tripled the length of Pakistan's natural coastline. Under no circumstances could it be permitted independence in matters of foreign or economic policy. Moreover, it possessed significant natural gas, coal and mineral reserves, the exploitation of which was indispensable to Pakistan's development plans. No ruling class was ever going to forfeit these willingly.

The artificial character of Pakistan's creation had only exacerbated the normal pressures of national unification. "Islam and the notion of Islamic brotherhood became the order of the day. It was unpatriotic on the part of Bengalis, Sindhis, Pathans and Baloch to make demands in terms of their regional ethnic identities because all Pakistanis were brothers in Islam." [2]

In 1955, under the pressures of widespread resentment in East Pakistan and the establishment's rootlessness in the peripheries of the West, Pakistan's political elite amalgamated the Western provinces into a single unit (the One Unit plan). The country was to be ruled from the Punjab.

Baloch Nationalism

It is this centralized, thoroughly alien character of the State's writ in Balochistan, then, that has inspired the conflict between the Baloch and the center. In an interview with Tariq Ali in 1981, Ataullah Mengal, a prominent nationalist politician, summarized these grievances in compelling fashion:

"When I was in Mach gaol in Balochistan, the situation was brought home to me very vividly. A prison warder is the lowest-paid government employee. There were 120 warders in the gaol, but only eleven of them were Baloch. If anyone had stated this, he would have been denounced as a traitor. When we took office in 1972, there were a total of 12,000 government employees in twenty-two grades. Only 3,000 were Baloch... There are only a few hundred Baloch in the entire Pakistan army. The famous Baloch regiment has no Baloch in it! ... The officers were from the Punjab and the soldiers from the Frontier. If you land at Quetta airport today and visit the city, you will soon realize that 95 per cent of the police constables have been brought from outside." (Ali 1983, 117)

In the six decades since Pakistan was founded, there have been five uprisings — three minor ones in 1948, 1958-1960, the mid-1960s, a major insurgency between 1973-1977, and a low-level conflict beginning in the early 2000s that festers to this day.

The character of these clashes has evolved as the province has developed. None of the early skirmishes had widespread military or political support. (Harrison, 25-29) Nonetheless, the Pakistani Army's treacherous conduct in the deals that concluded both the 1948 and 1958-1960 conflicts was fodder for future nationalists. In each, the Army promised amnesty to insurgents in exchange for laying down arms, but retreated from their commitments once a deal was made.

In the 1960s, under the leadership of Sher Mohammad Marri, a self-described "Marxist-Leninist," a

network of base camps was constructed with the aim of organizing a guerrilla movement. Sporadic clashes continued through the end of the decade, until the fall of Ayub Khan's government in 1969 led to the withdrawal of One Unit. Though, once again, the movement could hardly be said to have had broad support, its infrastructure would prove important to the popular insurgency that erupted in the 1970s. (Harrison 29-30, 33)

This war (1973-1977), and the events immediately preceding it, marked a decisive turning point in the nature of Baloch nationalism, as its chief organizations began to acquire a clear mass character.

A left-wing coalition of nationalists and communists from all corners of Pakistan, the National Awami Party (NAP), had been founded in 1957 to protest Ayub's imposition of One Unit. The organization channeled the "triune influence of provincial Autonomists, populism, and mass hostility to the pro-American foreign policy of successive governments" in a radical, left-leaning program. (Ali, 59)

Within the NAP worked the most prominent opposition figures in Balochistan, at the time: Khair Baxsh Marri, Ghaus Bux Bizenjo, and Attaullah Mengal. The three were significant tribal figures, but the party they headed had succeeded in building, as Balochistan developed, a non-tribal political base. In the 1970 elections after the fall of the military government, the NAP had won an overwhelming majority of Baloch votes.

As a consequence of the murderous war waged by the military establishment and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in East Pakistan in 1971 [resulting in the independence of Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan — ed.], the NAP government didn't take office until May 1972. Bizenjo became governor, and Mengal chief minister. Their government, though, proved terribly precarious.

By 1972, Bhutto found himself in a weak political position due to his betrayal of the constituencies that had thrust him into power. In this context, an independent opposition (the NAP governed, in coalition, in two of the four provinces) represented an additional threat, made worse by the NAP's unsettling designs to abolish the sardari system in Balochistan, and to assert provincial prerogatives against a Punjab-dominated bureaucracy. (Ali, 113)

International pressures were severe, as well, and Bhutto is alleged to have taken the decision to dismiss the NAP government in February 1973 on the urging of the Shah of Iran, who thought "letting the Baluch have provincial self-government...would give his Baluch dangerous ideas." By April 1973, Baloch guerrillas had begun to ambush army convoys, in response to which Bhutto dispatched four divisions to the province. (Harrison, 34, 36)

The ensuing war pitted as many as 55,000 guerrillas, disparately organized under "seven separate sets of leaders," against some 80,000 Pakistani troops. (Harrison, 71) After some initial success in the first year of the war, the superior organization and weaponry of the Army told. By September 1974, after a battle in which the Army lured several thousand Marri guerrillas into the open by attacking their families, the war had turned in the State's favor. (Harrison, 38)

Pitched hostilities continued until late 1975, but it wasn't until after Bhutto's ouster by Zia ul-Haq, in July 1977, that a truce was reached with the then-imprisoned triumvirate of Bizenjo, Mengal and Marri. As many as 6,000 Baloch had died in the fighting, and the use of torture by the Pakistani Army was commonplace. (Akbar 2011, 112; Jahnmahmad 1988, 312-313)

The peace deal ended the insurgency, and Zia released several thousand Baloch political prisoners, but none of the province's substantive grievances were addressed. The failure of the insurgency, in turn, had the effect of exacerbating the divisions between Baloch nationalists, the more militant of whom regarded the deal with Zia as a betrayal. (Jahnmahmad, 223) It marked, also, the beginning of

the end of political alliances between nationalists, across provinces.

The 1980s and 1990s were characterized by a few significant developments, though not overt conflict. Those in alliance with Mengal and Bizenjo turned to political contestation, [3] moderate and middle-class-based wings of the national movement emerged, and the central student organization (the Baloch Students Organization) also continued to grow. [4]

Khair Baxsh Marri, who remained committed to military struggle, stayed in exile in Afghanistan until the fall of the Najibullah government in 1992; his son, Balaach Marri, was important to relaunching the guerrilla struggle in the early 2000s.

Unfortunately, none of these efforts proved particularly successful at winning concessions from the central establishment, either under Zia or during the democratic governments of the 1990s. For this reason, a renewal of hostilities was inevitable.

The sparks were a series of incidents in the early-mid 2000s, under the Musharraf dictatorship, that exemplified the State's deep disregard for Baloch rights and aspirations. Musharraf commenced plans to develop a deep-sea port at Gwadar, which was controversial because it both grabbed land from locals and employed a disproportionate number of non-locals. He also expanded the State's network of military cantonments, building on land acquired from pliable sardars. [5]

In 2000, he imprisoned Khair Bux Marri, then in his 80s, on the concocted charge of being complicit in the assassination of a Balochistan High Court judge. In 2002, he deployed troops to blockade the town of Dera Bugti, alleging that Akbar Bugti, head of the Bugti tribe and historic figure in the province, was protecting rebels who were sabotaging the infrastructure for the extraction of natural gas. Three years later, the rape of a female doctor by Army members in a nearby hospital led to continuous clashes between the Bugti tribe and the Frontier Corps (a federal paramilitary force).

In August 2006, Musharraf escalated the conflict dramatically, outrageously ordering the murder of Akbar Bugti by helicopter attack on his hideout in the hills. By August 2009, ensuing clashes between the Army and various Baloch rebel groups had displaced as many as 200,000 people. (Akbar, 171)

The Present

Despite the transition to democracy in 2008, the Pakistan Peoples Party government has proved at best unable and at worst unwilling to take the necessary steps to resolve the situation in the province, where assassinations, abductions, and the military's general presence remain part and parcel of daily life.

The conflict today resembles the dynamics characteristic of any protracted clash with an occupying authority. Rebels target the infrastructure and personnel of the Pakistani State (from government buildings to gas pipelines), and occasionally even target the non-Baloch population of the province ("settlers").

The State, having greatly expanded its network of check posts and patrols inside the province, tramples unhesitatingly on the civil liberties of the Baloch population.

Assassinations of prominent political figures are routine, and nationalists estimate that a few thousand Baloch have disappeared into the dungeons of the Pakistani State (the infamous "missing persons"). (Akbar, 171. The figure given here is 5,000, though estimates vary widely.) An Amnesty

International report covering October 2010 to February 2011 documented an average of 15-20 extrajudicial assassinations a month. [6]

Schematically, one can think of the nationalists as divided into three broad wings. First, there are the armed groups committed to attacking the infrastructure and personnel of the Pakistani State. The most prominent of these groups are the Baloch Liberation Army (Balaach Marri, its alleged leader, was murdered in November 2007), and the Baloch Republican Army.

Second, there are several mass, urban-based organizations who have rejected the strategy of parliamentary politics and are resolutely committed to the same goals as the armed resistance. [7] This wing formed the Baloch National Front in February 2009. [8] Only two months after its founding, three of its leaders were abducted, in broad daylight, from the office of the lawyer they shared. They were reportedly killed the same night, and their bodies recovered four days later. (Akbar, 135 and 147-9)

Third, there are the more traditional political parties, who have yet to fully forfeit the strategy of relying on conventional forms of politicking — these include the Balochistan National Party (led by Attaullah and his son, Akhtar Mengal), the National Party (founded by Mir Hasil Khan Bizenjo, Ghaus Bakhsh's son), and the Jamhoori Watan Party (led by Talal Akbar Bugti, one of Bugti's sons).

As the situation in the province has deteriorated, these parties' commitment to the political process has been tested. But even after Bugti's assassination, only the BNP decided to immediately resign from office, significantly also ditching its program of provincial autonomy in favor of demanding self-determination. (Akbar, 178)

The tragedy remains that, across the board, the nationalists' goals are not matched by the requisite military or political clout. Despite the development of some industrial clusters in the areas bordering Karachi, Balochistan has not developed into a significant site of capital accumulation. [9]

Neither the odd mega-development nor the resource extraction infrastructure employ considerable numbers of locals, which means that the nationalists' capacity to impose crippling costs on Pakistan's ruling class is limited to attacks on this infrastructure from without. These are significant in frustrating the State's further designs for the province, certainly, but it's unclear that they will succeed in bringing the Pakistani elite to its knees.

Similarly, the agitation of students and the middle classes remains a formidable index of the illegitimacy of the Pakistani project, but the State currently seems content to meet the challenge through its repressive arms. Whether this route, too, will win the concessions Baloch nationalists seek remains indeterminate, at best.

The Left's Job

For the Left, the principal obligations are fairly clear. None of the leading organizations in Pakistan have significant membership in Balochistan, which is thoroughly dominated, politically, by the nationalists. Their growing sense of alienation from Pakistan has eroded, it seems, the sorts of links to other nationalists and the Left that the NAP represented in its heyday.

Given this, the Left's task is to fight where it stands — to protest the brutality of the State's response to Baloch aspirations in Sindh, Punjab, and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. Successful, large-scale protests in these provinces could have considerable effects on State policy. They would also go some way to restoring political relations with Baloch nationalists.

The trouble, of course, is that this remains aspirational — not because the legitimacy of the Baloch struggle is unrecognized, but rather because of the persistent weakness of Left organization. Mobilizing the infrastructure that does exist for the defense of constituencies' self-interest is difficult enough; but organizing textile workers in Punjab, for example, to strike in solidarity with the Baloch demands a level of organization that just doesn't exist.

It is further incumbent upon the Left to publicly reject the narratives employed to undermine the legitimacy of the Baloch rebellion. It's often argued that the rebellion is backward-looking, insofar as it has been prominently led by sardars (the triumvirate of the 1970s, most famously) who fight because they're opposed to the modernization. Occasionally this finds echoes in progressive assessments of the movement.

The reality, though, is quite different. Not only have the vast majority of sardars always been more pro-government than their population, the legitimate political outlets of the Baloch (be they sardar-led, or not) have consistently made the abolition of sardari and the modernization of the province one of their principal demands. (Jahnmahmad, 216, 254) The State's claim that it has been frustrated by a handful of recalcitrant sardars in its genuine intentions to develop Balochistan is belied by the conditions of the territories governed by pro-government sardars.

As Attaullah Mengal noted in a 2006 interview, "There are 72 sardars sitting in Musharraf's lap... But the state of those sardars' areas is as deplorable as that of any other area in the province." (Akbar, 242)

Second, rebels' targeting of civilian settlers is frequently cited to dismiss them as "terrorists." At best, it's claimed that both parties to the conflict — the State, and the insurgents — are guilty of violating the civil liberties of bystanders. The Left has an obligation to clarify that this perspective is unforgivably apolitical. The structuring asymmetries of the conflict — decades of oppression, exclusion and repression — are the soil in which the "excesses" of the Baloch rebellion have germinated.

There is, certainly, a comradely brand of accountability that might be brought to bear; assassinations of civilian "settlers" are, after all, almost certainly politically counterproductive. But there is little utility to making strategic proclamations from positions of irrelevance, for the purposes of moral purity. Critics, unsurprisingly, will have to earn the right to be heard.

As Pakistan marks the 65th anniversary of its independence, the ongoing rebellion of the Baloch is a damning verdict on the country's ruling-class. The fact that the national question remains arguably the most salient fault line in the country's politics — not just in Balochistan, but in Sindh, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, Gilgit-Baltistan, and even inside Punjab itself — illustrates the colossal failure of the State's attempts to chloroform popular aspirations in the hollow language of "national unity."

The different movements vary widely in the extent to which they deserve the Left's allegiance. But as a rule, for a weak Left that has its most significant constituencies in the core of the country, the (re)construction of a pan-Pakistan popular movement will be impossible if progressives are dismissive of provincial nationalism. To the credit of the existing Left, this is widely understood, even if much work remains to be done.

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P.S.

* From Against the Current (ATC), n° 161, November/December 2012:

<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/3725>

Footnotes

[1] "This maneuver was part of the deeply conservative core of colonial administrative techniques, which mobilized — and thus amplified — local traditions of rule and regulation. For the British, the central dilemma, as Mahmood Mamdani has reminded us, was to figure out how "a tiny and foreign minority [can] rule over an indigenous majority." The natural strategy was to rely heavily on local elites — tribal chiefs, landlords, and especially the priestly strata — and thereby reinforce the symbolic, cultural, and legal traditions that sanctioned rule by these elites. In India, it meant using local caste and religious divisions and giving them a salience that they had never enjoyed before..." (Vivek Chibber, "The Good Empire: Should we pick up where the British left off?" Boston Review, Feb/March 2005).

[2] Hamza Alavi, "Pakistan and Islam: Ethnicity and Ideology," in Hamza Alavi and Fred Halliday, *State and Ideology in the Middle East and Pakistan* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988), 106-107.

[3] See Ahmar Mustikhan, "Interview with Akhtar Mengal," (February 2012)
<http://www.examiner.com/article/baloch-cms-premiers-all-are-powerless-before-army-mengal>.

[4] See Nadeem Paracha, "When the doves cry," (February 2012)
<http://dawn.com/2012/02/02/when-the-doves-cry/>.

[5] Adeel Khan, "Renewed Ethnonationalist Insurgency in Balochistan, Pakistan" *Asian Survey* (November/December 2009), 1081.

[6] Amnesty International, "Victims of reported disappearances and alleged extrajudicial and unlawful killings in Balochistan," (2011)
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/REG01/001/2011/en/9b6e31cb-ef5f-4d99-ad6a-17bd3af35661/reg010012011en.pdf>.

[7] In the 1970s, even Sher Mohammad Mari had argued that secession was not his aim (*Pakistan Forum*, 38). This speaks volumes about the way in which the intransigence and repression of the

Pakistani State has committed more and more Baloch to aspiring for full independence from Pakistan.

[8] Hamza Alavi, "Pakistan and Islam: Ethnicity and Ideology," in Hamza Alavi and Fred Halliday, *State and Ideology in the Middle East and Pakistan* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988), 106-107.

[9] "Balochistan is by and large a labor-scarce economy with little crop production (apart from the irrigated Kachhi plains), almost no industry (apart from the Hub region near Karachi), and services catering almost entirely to local demand." ("Pakistan Balochistan Economic Report: From Periphery to Core," World Bank [2008]).