

Holding Balochistan hostage: Through the election bullet

Saturday 11 May 2013, by [Bin RASHID Hashim](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2013).

On May 1, 2013, 22,000 troops and 50,000 'law enforcers' entered 12 districts of Balochistan to "conduct a free-and-fair election". The existing number of troops in the areas shall not be revealed to us, nor the fact that de facto these areas had been no-go areas for the military since the current Baloch insurgency started in 2005. With the entry of troops, the possibility of free-and-fair elections in the province has ended. Rather the Baloch people shall have elections shoved down their throats with a gun to their head.

It does not matter if the Baloch people want to give their stamp of approval to the selection processes of the Pakistani state. Rather, the pretense, or the formality, that 'the Baloch people' confirm their stamp of faith in the State, shall be obtained, under the sound of the boots of the fine men in khaki. If it wasn't quite obvious when the operation was announced, the Balochistan home secretary made it clear the day before the operation: the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), the Balochistan Republican Army (BRA), the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLA), the United Baloch Army (UBA) and the Lashkar-e-Balochistan (LB) would be targeted.

No one seems to recall that the outrage over the kill-and-dump of missing persons - or "kidnapped Baloch" as Muhammad Hanif chose to clarify - by state agencies was about individuals from the same groups. Over 300 bodies of these missing persons had been recovered since 2011 - all the killings blamed on the Pakistani state. The calls for the past three years, since the announcement of the token Aghaz-e-Haqooq-e-Balochistan package in 2009, had been for the withdrawal of army troops from Balochistan and accountability of the agencies, neither of which could be delivered during the PPP-era.

Back in 2008, President Zardari also issued a token apology to the Baloch people. But with nothing changing on the ground, with one after the other Baloch nationalist being killed-and-dumped, the resentment amongst the Baloch people has grown deeper. Bodies have been returned to each district.

Nothing has also changed about the conception of development being applied to the province. The great hallmark that the 18th amendment was supposed to be was circumvented with imprudence. The control of the Gwadar Port was handed over to China and the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline started in the two month period the Balochistan government had been dissolved earlier this year. The so-called failure of the never existent Balochistan government was in fact that failure (or complicity) of the state apparatus in the spate of Hazara killings - duly stopped the minute the establishment's aims in the province were achieved.

But the joke about the current military operation in Balochistan runs much deeper. It comes on the back of five years of the PPP-led coalition governments at both the province and centre denying accusations that a military operation was underway in Balochistan. It is a bit strange that the caretaker government has taken it upon itself to take on the mandate of announcing a full-blown military operation in Balochistan.

This is not to say that the fears expressed by government schools teachers are not well-founded. The discontent with the Pakistani state is such that government schools in a number of districts in Balochistan have not been able to display the Pakistani flag for a number of years.

The Balochistan caretaker setup has pointed to security threats to candidates and election officials in Balochistan as reason for announcing the current military operation. But the question is how important are the political parties contesting polls in Balochistan to the Baloch people? Let us name them: the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, the Pakistan Peoples Party, the Jamaat-i-Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl, the National Party and the Balochistan National Party-Mengal (BNP-M). Only two of these parties have any credentials so to speak of in Balochistan. Of these, the National Party leadership, including Dr Malik and Hasil Bizenjo, spend the bulk of their time in Islamabad, while the BNP-M chief Akhtar Mengal was in self-exile from the country until the interim setup took over. However, the bulk of the nationalist movement has chosen to keep itself outside the trapping of the upcoming polls.

Apart from the dismissed NAP government of the Bhutto era, Balochistan cannot be said to have ever had any semblance of 'representative government'. Nor does there appear to be any serious resolve on part of the Pakistan establishment to give Balochistan representative government. Sources from within the state say that, as a lesson from the separation of East Pakistan, they now fear any nationalists coming into power through the ballot and presenting something akin to Sheikh Mujib's Six Points.

This is why there are army men in nine districts, including Dera Bugti, Kohlu, Awaran, Washuk, Khuzdar, Kalat, Mastung, Kharan and Gwadar districts. The question is what will the cleanup operation mean on the ground? "Not a single militant will be spared by May 11" is what the caretaker provincial home minister said. Bullets and arrests have been promised. It is another way of saying: expect more kills-and-dumps, unreported raids on villages and more anger from the Baloch.

When national newspapers continue to express worries that "there is no election excitement in Balochistan", it appears they are delusional. Elections are a celebration of a belief that participating in the processes of the state can offer deliverance. Barely anyone in Balochistan believes such. If the Baloch people, as a whole, feel disenfranchised from the processes of the state, then why bake up this cosmetic drama of an election in the province?

Let us learn to call a spade a spade: these are not measures to secure the elections, this is a full-blown operation against Baloch nationalists.

For Baloch nationalists, the province was made to join Pakistan at gunpoint. Now, it appears, after a sixth decade long insurgency, it will be made to enter elections at gunpoint. The consequences, it must be said with regret, are fated.

With the military presence in Balochistan, there cannot be a 'free-and-fair' election. Let us not subscribe to any such mistaken notions. Another farce is about to be created in Balochistan in the name of representative government. All the efforts at reconciliation of Baloch nationalists should be considered abandoned. Balochistan is being held hostage in the name of the elections. The consequences will not be pretty.

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P.S.

* From Pakistan Today, Wednesday, 1 May 2013 9:33 pm:

<http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2013/05/01/comment/holding-balochistan-hostage/>

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