

The Plight of the Baloch

Introduction

Balochistan is the largest region of Pakistan, occupying 43 percent of Pakistan’s total land mass of 796,000 square kilometers. However, it is the country’s least populated province, accounting for a mere 5% of the 176,7 million inhabitants of Pakistan in 2011. The Baloch people are a unique ethno-linguistic group spread between Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan, who have been the victims of marginalization throughout history. While the Baloch ethnic group is the largest in the province, it is not known definitively whether or not its members comprise the majority of the province’s population as the last census is both out of date (from 1998) and does not ask about ethnicity. The Pashtuns and the Brahui are the two other largest ethnic groups, and the region is also home to Sindhis and Punjabis and to smaller groups such as Uzbeks, Turkmens and Sikhs.



Historical Background

In 1884, Balochistan was annexed to the British Empire, which was seeking both to establish a buffer zone between its own empire and that of the Russians and to secure safe transit routes to Afghanistan. The British ceded the western part of the territory (now Sistan-o-Balochistan Province) to Iran and the northern part to Afghanistan. Part of the remaining area became “British Balochistan,” and was divided into the Khanate of Kalat and three other principalities. At the time of the Partition, these four princely states were forced to choose between joining India or Pakistan. The Khanate of Kalat had been *de facto* independent under British rule and was now forced to accede to Pakistan. In defiance of the Khan, his younger brother led a separatist movement in 1948 against the Pakistan government, also known as *the First Rebellion*. He invited leading members of the Baloch political parties to join him in their struggle for the creation of an independent ‘Greater Balochistan’. The Pakistani army nevertheless invaded the region and annexed the Khanate to Pakistan. The other three princely states also joined Pakistan.

The Second Rebellion of 1958-1959 was sparked because of the implementation of the One Unit policy, a measure that decreased the federal representation of tribal leaders. In 1963-1969 the Pakistani government imposed a plan to construct military bases in these key conflict areas. This measure led to guerrilla warfare, or *the Third Rebellion*, by several Baloch tribes. One of their key demands was a fair share in the revenue from the local gas fields. In 1969 a ceasefire was agreed upon and the One Unit policy was abolished. In 1970, Balochistan was recognized as the fourth province of (West) Pakistan, containing all the former Baloch princely states. From 1973 until 1977, the *Fourth Rebellion* took place after President Bhutto abolished the provincial governments and imposed martial law, citing treason. This led to armed insurgency, with a large number of tribesmen taking part in guerrilla warfare against the central government. Until the nineties, the exile of many Baloch tribal leaders led to a political vacuum in Balochistan. The central government started focusing more on religion, in particular Sunni Islam, as a means to neutralize nationalist sentiments.

In 2005, the Baloch political leaders presented a 15-point agenda to the Pakistani government. Their demands included greater control of the province’s resources and a moratorium on the construction of military bases. Nevertheless, the Pakistani Intelligence keeps on targeting leaders and members of the Baloch National Movement. Its president, Ghulam Mohammed Baloch was assassinated in April 2009. The ongoing conflict is considered as *the Fifth Rebellion* of the Baloch in their struggle against the oppressive policy of the Pakistani government.



Social and Economic Issues

Balochistan is Pakistan's most underdeveloped province, requiring an additional 12,000 schools to provide basic education for all its children. At the same time, the region is the most resource-rich in Pakistan: in the area 47 different minerals can be found, including huge deposits of copper, uranium, gold, coal, silver, and platinum. In addition, it is responsible for about 36% of Pakistan's total gas production. Astonishingly, only 17% of the gas produced is consumed in Balochistan while the rest is consumed in other parts of Pakistan. Not only is Balochistan denied the use of its own resources, the government has historically required Balochistan to sell gas at a lower rate than the other provinces.

By virtue of its energy resources and its location, Balochistan is key to the energy supply to South Asia, including Pakistan. The country's mounting energy crisis and the growing demand for energy security in the region have magnified Balochistan's economic and strategic importance. Yet without addressing the grave political challenges in the province, Islamabad is pursuing an ambitious plan to import one billion cubic feet of gas per day through the 2,100km-long Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline. Currently, however, the proposed project does not envisage any economic or social benefits for Balochistan's under-privileged population.

The construction of a deep-sea port at Gwador has proved to be the most controversial of the central government's undertakings in the province in recent decades. The port will be situated on Balochistan's Makran Coast at Gwador and will be an important counterweight to the Iranian deep-sea port at Chahbahar. Work began in March 2002, with China paying \$198 million of the \$248 million total budget and providing 450 engineers. The first phase of the construction was completed in 2006, the second phase started in 2007. The Pakistani government and the Chinese government will respectively take 50% and 48% of the proceeds, leaving only 2% for Balochistan. All of the construction contracts have gone to non-Baloch firms and the majority of the jobs on site are taken by Punjabis or other non-Baloch. Many in the province perceive Gwador as a massive effort to further colonize the province by Punjabis and other patrons of the military and bureaucracy. In fact, while elites are also accused of bribing officials to register land in their name and cutting out locals who had owned the land for generations, civilians and military personnel are also acquiring land in Gwador at extremely low cost and in turn selling it to developers at a higher price. Moreover, the project will fundamentally change the demography of the area from a mere 70,000 Baloch to an expected two million, mostly non-Baloch.

Security Challenges

In Pakistan, the continuing problem of sectarian violence poses threats to many communities. This almost always takes the form of Deobandi Sunni extremist violence against Pakistan's minority Shia community. In recent years, these Deobandi Sunni militant groups (e.g. Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan, etc.) have also taken up arms against other Sunnis (e.g. Barelvis) whom they deride as being apostates or hypocrites. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, despite positive cooperation with the West in the war against Afghanistan, Pakistan stayed loyal to the Afghan Taliban - who are Pashtun. This loyalty dates back to the post-soviet years when Pakistan offered diplomatic recognition to the Taliban regime under Mullah Omar in exchange of stability in Afghanistan and more importantly, a pro-Pakistan leadership in Kabul that denied India influence in Afghanistan.

Furthermore, the war in Afghanistan has caused, firstly, an influx of Pashtun refugees from Afghanistan into Balochistan, numerically marginalizing the Baloch population within their own province. The Pashtuns in the north of Balochistan have achieved greater economic progress than the Baloch within the province because of infrastructure and commercial links created during the British era. Secondly, it has led to an influx of extremist militants which has brought more federal army and paramilitary troops into the province. However, the Baloch people are deeply reluctant to Pakistan allowing the Afghan Taliban to run their war against US forces in Afghanistan from Quetta, the provincial capital. In fact, the Taliban leadership council is called the Quetta Shura. Thirdly, in the name of the so-called war against terrorism, the economic and weaponry support provided to Pakistan's army to counter the Taliban are being used against the Baloch national struggle for independence, allowing crimes and human rights violations to be perpetrated against Baloch people.



While Chagai in the Balochistan region is known for being the nation's nuclear testing ground, its impact on the Baloch people has had less media coverage. On May 28, 1998, Pakistan conducted five nuclear tests at Chagai. Baloch locals allege that the nuclear tests have devastated the ecology of the area, contaminated the water and originated mental and physical diseases in Chagai and surrounding areas.

Human Rights and Humanitarian Concerns

The main ongoing challenge for Pakistan, as denounced by several international human rights organizations lies in enforced disappearances. Extensive investigations by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) accuse Pakistan's security forces of making ethnic Baloch, who the security services believe to be involved in Baloch nationalist causes, disappear. It is estimated that about 18,000 people have gone missing in the province since 2003. In late January 2014, three mass graves were discovered in the Khuzdar district in Balochistan, uncovering over a hundred bodies. Moreover, several reported cases of acid attacks against young women and girls took place near Quetta in July 2014, in an attempt to frighten girls from leaving their homes and play an active role in society.

Balochistan also has the weakest long-term growth performance of all provinces in the country. After limited economic opportunities, severe floods and restrictions on international relief organisations, the caloric poverty in Balochistan was recorded around 74 per cent in 2011, compared with 49.7 per cent in 2001-02. The province is also far behind the national and average provincial levels of literacy, enrolment, progression, attainment, gender parity and has the highest infant and maternal mortality rate in South Asia.

In light of the continuing security challenges throughout Pakistan, the country has witnessed an ongoing population movement between Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also a massive internal displacement caused by severe floods. Current figures for IDPs in Balochistan in particular are not available, thus remaining invisible because of ongoing military operations and a media ban in the region. However, it seems that Pakistani officials are issuing fake registrations of about one million Afghans seeking asylum in the country. This policy is changing the demographic structure in some districts of Balochistan, including Bolan and Sibi, thus making the Baloch a minority in their own province.

The Pakistani government continues to deny humanitarian agencies access to the displaced in the name of security and safety, and has no national policy on addressing conflict-induced displacement. In addition, the security situation of local peace and development workers is seriously under threat: for instance, during the month of November 2014 four polio workers were killed in Balochistan.

Death penalty is another ongoing issue in Pakistan as more than 8,000 prisoners remain on death row. Child offenders may lawfully be sentenced to corporal punishment, life imprisonment and the death penalty. Legal reform has gone some way to prohibiting corporal and capital punishment for child offenders, but the law is complex and unclear and these sentences remain lawful in certain circumstances, despite the fact that the Juvenile Justice System Ordinance (JJSO) was adopted way back in 2000.

In 2014, human rights abuses and security incidences further intensified. Due to the Protection of Pakistan Act (PPA), which was passed in July 2014, law enforcement agencies and the military received a legal waiver to conduct enforced disappearances, extrajudicial executions, preventive as well as arbitrary arrests, torture and to further restrict the freedom of the press. This counterterrorism legislation violates international human rights standards and it lacks accountability and transparency. Furthermore, in the wake of the school attacks in Peshawar killing 149 people in December 2014, a constitutional amendment has been passed that allows military courts, instead of civilian ones, to handle terrorism cases. The bill raises fears that it will serve as a pretext to try Baloch civilians without respecting their fundamental freedoms.



Conclusion

At the heart of the problem in Balochistan lay reasonable political and economic grievances which are eminently resolvable. Despite the intense and ongoing military operations, few Pakistanis outside Balochistan know about the existence of the province and about the problems that plague it. Under Pakistan's current system, Balochistan is unlikely to receive the policy attention that it deserves. The province has too little representation (14 seats out of 340 at the National Assembly in Pakistan) and too few domestic allies to sustain a Balochistan-centric agenda that could resolve the various conflicts in the province. After plenty of breaches of treaties and deals by the Pakistan government, trust no longer characterizes the negotiations for the Baloch. International attention and support is therefore required to solve this ongoing conflict, that so far has only been met by military means.

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About UNPO

The UNPO is an international, nonviolent, and democratic membership organisation established in 1991. Its members are indigenous peoples, minorities, and territories who have joined to protect and promote their human rights through nonviolent solutions.

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