

Baloch Nationalism: International Perspectives and Support

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Preamble

For years, the Pakistan's India-centric propaganda machine has focussed on Kashmir, churning out false narratives and planted stories. While the Pakistanis' attention was focussed on Kashmir, the centrepiece of their 'revisionist' agenda, the steady rise of nationalism, accompanied by a simmering insurgency in Balochistan was hidden from the world. Pakistan has never been satisfied with the outcome of partition, though the composition of the country itself contains many fissures. Among them, the largest fissure is Balochistan. Like Bangladesh, the rise of Balochi nationalism challenges the very foundation of the two-nation theory, and, resultantly, that of Pakistan. The Baloch have a historical *casus belli*, their grievances are just, and the eventual creation of a separate Baloch nation is likely. Equally, the Pakistani oppression is brutal, the media often ignores the Baloch story, and international support is intermittent. For India, it is an apt case for support, within the parameters of international law and the norms of international relations.

Historical Wrongs

Balochistan is the largest province of Pakistan, spread over 347,190 sq km and comprising 44 per cent of the total area, but it is the most sparsely inhabited, with only five per cent of the country's total population.¹ It is rich in natural

resources, yet is one of the poorest regions of the country. The Baloch nationalist movement has deep roots, centred on the Khanate of Kalat, established in 1666 by Mir Ahmad. Later, the British conquered the tribal areas of Marri, Bugti, Khetran and Chaghi that were brought under direct British administration. The remaining areas of Sarawan, Jhalawan, Kacchi and Makranwere were retained as the Khanate of Kalat, supervised by a political agent. The British areas were under the rule of a Chief Commissioner, and not of the same status as other provinces of British India. The representatives of Kalat argued that as per the treaty of 1876, Kalat was an independent and sovereign state, a position accepted by Lord Mountbatten. Subsequently, the then Khan of Kalat, Ahmad Yar Khan, declared independence, but his Khanate was forcibly annexed by Pakistan in 1948.

Aggrieved, the Baloch have waged five wars of independence, of which the last one erupted in 2004, and is still simmering. Pakistan's repression has been brutal. In August 2006, 79-year old Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti was killed in a military operation, and in April 2009, gunmen killed Baloch National Movement (BNM) President Ghulam Mohammed Baloch and two other leaders, viz; Lala Munir and Sher Muhammad. In August 2009, the current Khan of Kalat, Mir Suleiman Dawood, declared himself the ruler of Balochistan and formally announced a Council for Independent Balochistan. The council claimed the allegiance of all leaders, including Nawabzada Brahumdagh Bugti who now leads the Baloch Republican Party (BRP). The BRP advocates the independence of a "greater" Balochistan and opposes any sort of political dialogue, calling upon the international community to intervene to halt a "genocide."²

US-based Baloch journalist Malik Siraj Akbar writes that the current Baloch resistance has created serious challenges for the Pakistan government. It is not like the past movements. It has lasted longer, has greater breadth, including the entire province, from the rural mountainous regions to the city centres, involves Baloch women and children at regular protest rallies, and has drawn international attention, including a 2012 hearing by the US Congress. Politically and economically marginalised, many Baloch see the insurgency as a defensive response to the perceived colonisation of their province by the Punjabi-dominated military. Apart from being fuelled by military repression and human rights violations, it is also reflective of the societal changes. Baloch nationalism grew within the tribal structures before gradually spreading to other sectors of society. The emergence of Baloch nationalism today is the product of a long and

complex process of emancipation of the Baloch middle class, often educated outside Balochistan.³

International Perspectives

Stuart Notholt, in *Atlas of Ethnic Conflict*, describes the unrest in Balochistan as a “nationalist/self-determination conflict”.⁴ Internationally the Balochistan movement is acknowledged, but is often characterised as an insurgency. Since the Baloch are devoid of diplomatic support, the region is not depicted as disputed. The international community has acknowledged the deterioration in the situation, including the fact that Balochistan is slowly but surely descending into anarchy. Think-tanks have described it as a bubbling “*cauldron of ethnic, sectarian, secessionist and militant violence, threatening to boil over at any time.*”⁵ On August 14, 2019, Pakistan was left red-faced after #BaluchistanSolidarityDay and #14AugustBlackDay started trending on Twitter with more than 100,000 tweets and 54,000 tweets, respectively.⁶ With an estimated US\$1 trillion in natural resources and sitting astride an international crossroads of increasingly critical importance, Balochistan is becoming a stage on which the world’s powers are playing out their ambitions.⁷

Frederic Grare of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has argued that the UN should send a permanent observation mission to Balochistan to monitor the human rights situation. Such a mission would create greater transparency, promote accountability, and build confidence, should the security establishment decide to change its policies.⁸ The human rights organisations have been keeping Balochistan under their scanner. In 2015, the Human Rights Watch accused Pakistani security forces of “continuing to unlawfully kill and forcibly disappear (*sic*) suspected Baloch militants and opposition activists”. According to the Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), there seems to be little doubt about the fact that most of the disappearances in Balochistan have been perpetrated by Pakistan’s “intelligence agencies and the Frontier Corps, often acting in conjunction with the local police.”⁹

In September 2017, a ‘Balochistan Bleeding’ Conference was organised at the UN office in Geneva. A member of the Polish Parliament, Jacek Wlosowicz, condemned Pakistan for its atrocious stand on the people of Balochistan and for reducing them to a minority in their homeland. The representative of Balochistan at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), Mehran Marri, also expressed the plight of the Baloch people, saying, “Baluchistan is being killed by thousand cuts, a slow motion genocide taking place while the world watches with their lips sealed

(sic) and arms locked up in restraint.” The World Baloch Organisation (WBO) organised a protest in Geneva to raise awareness for human rights violations in Balochistan.¹⁰ In September 2019, Khalil Baloch, the BNM chairperson, in a statement at the 42nd session of the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) said that the UN and its affiliated organisations need to act practically on the humanitarian crisis of Balochistan, and that the atrocities of Pakistan and the Baloch genocide demand intervention from global institutions.¹¹

In the European Union (EU), while some member states have expressed concern, the elected representatives have been supportive of the Baloch cause. European Parliament member Alberto Cirio recently urged the international community “to take notice of a situation created due to years of concerted government use of extremist groups as proxies against political activists, journalists and intellectuals.”¹² In July 2019, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) sent a letter to US President Donald Trump, requesting his intervention in the deteriorating situation in Balochistan. The MEPs specifically highlighted that “since 1947, there have been no reports of any terrorist activities by any Balochistan organisation. Indeed, they supported the US Army in Afghanistan in the fight against terrorism.”¹³

For the millions of Americans watching the 2018 New Year’s Eve celebrations in Times Square, a curious sign could be seen flashing in bright yellow throughout the night that referred to a place and a situation very few had ever heard of: “#Free Balochistan From Human Rights Abuses By Pakistan.” It was part of a wider campaign by the WBO and included signs in London at the Houses of Parliament, Marble Arch, and Shoreditch High Street. However, the overall US approach on Balochistan can be best described as ‘cautious’, mainly because of the presence of US troops in Afghanistan and the need to maintain the supply routes through Pakistan. For the US, Balochistan has become one of the bargaining chips with Pakistan in dealing with the Taliban in the Af-Pak region.¹⁴

Brahumdagh Bugti, the founder of the BRP, was in Kabul for many years, before going into exile in Switzerland in 2010. In 2018 and 2019, Pakistan orchestrated attacks on Baloch leaders in Afghanistan. On December 25, 2018, Aslam Baloch and six other Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) commanders were killed in a suicide attack in Kandahar, and on May 23, 2019, another attack took place in Aino Mina, Kandahar, whose target was Laghari Bugti’s house.

China has massive investments in Balochistan under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), including development of the deep-water Gwadar port. Overall CPEC investments promised by China in Pakistan were worth

US\$ 46 billion, later revised to US\$ 62 billion. A security division of the Pakistan Army of 15,000 soldiers has been allocated to provide security for the CPEC.¹⁵ Until now, China's only response to the disputes in Balochistan has been to call on Pakistan's Army to ensure security.

The indifference of China is not new as the Chinese have never supported any human rights issue across the globe, and, in fact, are comfortable in dealing with all shades of dictatorial regimes. Robert D Kaplan, in his book, *The Return of Marco Polo's World*, notes that China constitutes a very distinct imperial mindset. Because it was a vast empire for thousands of years under many dynasties, China simply takes for granted its superiority, and, consequently, has never sought to influence others in the proper way of governance. China's particular imperial tradition allows it to deal with all sorts of regimes, good and evil, without any notion of guilt.¹⁶ Therefore, it is unlikely that China will look at Balochistan from any other than the security point of view.

Aware of US constraints, and the Chinese approach, the Baloch nationalists periodically urge India to support their movement for an independent nation. After watching the deteriorating situation in Balochistan for years, India made a significant policy shift in 2016. In his Independence Day speech at the Red Fort, Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted Pakistan's atrocities in Balochistan and expressed his solidarity with its people in their struggle for self-determination.¹⁷ Further signs of India's policy shift appeared when All India Radio (AIR) launched a website and a mobile application of a Balochi radio service in September 2016. Although the radio service was launched back in 1974 by AIR's external services division, the website and application are aimed at reaching out to the Baloch diaspora settled in different parts of the world.

After India declared its support, the Baloch separatist leaders living in exile have welcomed India's stance. The effects were felt as far away as Europe, where Baloch people came out on the streets in Leipzig, waving the Indian flag and raising slogans against Pakistan. BRP spokesperson Sher Mohammad Bugti informed the European Council on Foreign Relations, "We are hoping that India will help us, like it helped Bangladesh."¹⁸ Brahumdagh Bugti, the BRP leader living in exile in Switzerland, also made numerous pro-India statements, and announced that he will be seeking asylum in India. Another exiled Baloch leader, Hyrbyair Marri, has been seeking a greater Indian role. Hyrbyair Marri is the son of the veteran Baloch leader Nawab Khair Bakhsh Marri and the founder of the Free Baluchistan Movement (FBM). In a November 2019 interview to the

Week magazine, he appealed for Indian help. According to him, an independent Balochistan would not only benefit the Baloch people, but it would also be a geo-political investment by India in the region. Balochistan's energy resources are vast and India's emerging economy needs enormous energy resources to compete with China and other countries.¹⁹

The Way Ahead

- **Role of the UN:** In September 2012, Pakistan permitted a UN mission to visit Balochistan. It spent ten days, meeting with government officials and about 100 private citizens to investigate the fate of disappeared persons in Balochistan.²⁰ The delegation came at the invitation of the Pakistan government, a tacit admission that there is a problem, despite official denials. The UN mission was primarily an attempt to call international attention to the issue of enforced disappearances. Earlier, the US and UK both had expressed concerns over the human rights situation in Balochistan during the 19th session of the UNHRC.²¹ The role of the UN could evolve further as it could become a guarantor of peace, helping to build confidence between the political parties and the security establishment, if they could come to an agreement.
- **US Intervention:** Some researchers like Afshan Ahmed from the Sustainable Development Policy Institute have examined the possible role of the US as a mediator in the Baloch conflict. However, prevailing anti-American sentiments in Pakistan will not easily accept the US role in dealing with any issue related to the self-determination rights of the Baloch.²² China is also not likely to intervene in an area with a significant One Belt One Road (OBOR) footprint. However, in the long-term, the deep-rooted democratic universalism of the US, which seeks religious-like conversion to its principles worldwide, provides hope that the US will take a more pro-Baloch stance.
- **Chinese Mediation:** Baloch nationalists have opposed the Chinese presence and investments projects. They are apprehensive about the CPEC developments as many Baloch are afraid that demographic changes may then convert them into a minority group in their own homeland. Already, many people in Gwadar have sold their lands at cut-rate prices to investors from outside.²³ Shi Zhiqin and Lu Yang, in a paper for the Carnegie-Tsinghua Centre have stated, "China should abandon its traditional way of dealing only with the Pakistani government and instead get in contact with local

communities to better accommodate local interests.” The drawback is that China will take a pro-military stance and that may limit its goals to CPEC projects.

- **An Indian Role:** BNP President Akhtar Mengal has proposed a “peaceful divorce” with Pakistan, that is, a referendum in Balochistan on self-determination.²⁴ India should support this call for a referendum as it eschews any violence and promotes a clean separation based on the will of the people. In many ways, India is the best-suited mediator on the issue. India has the trust of a large number of Baloch nationalists and other key stakeholders like the US, Iran and Afghanistan. This role should not be viewed by Pakistan from the perspective of their powerful security establishment, but as a positive step towards regional stability.

Conclusion

The US is unlikely to provide an impetus in resolving the Baloch issue until the completion of the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. The attention of the international community is presently focussed on the more volatile US-Iran escalation. In this context, international monitoring of the human rights situation in Balochistan by the UN and its various agencies could be a limited, yet effective, means of keeping up pressure on Pakistan. Balochistan’s liberation struggle is a democratic and secular movement, led by an educated and aspiring middle class. A peaceful resolution is imperative for regional stability. While the US may not like to mediate on this issue till US troops are safely out of Afghanistan, the EU has only limited leverage in the region, and the Chinese mediation will be limited to ensuring the security of the CPEC projects. Therefore, India must take the lead in highlighting the Baloch cause, provide the much-needed diplomatic support, mediate even if opposed by Pakistan’s security establishment, and fulfil its larger role of providing stability and peace in the region.

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Notes

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