
Baluchistan: A Hotbed for Insurgency

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Any uneasiness, disturbance, or uprising in Pakistan's Baluchistan province is considered a national security concern with regional and international implications. This strategically important province borders Iran and Afghanistan and has a coastline of 750 kilometers, stretching from Hab (near Karachi) to the port of Gwadar (being built with Chinese assistance) along the Arabian Sea. The westernmost part of Baluchistan is not far from the Strait of Hormuz.¹ The province is rich in minerals; the country's largest natural gas reserve (in Sui) is located there. Baluchistan is also the homeland of the aggressive Bugti tribe.

Baluchistan fits awkwardly into the federation of Pakistan. Although the province constitutes 44% of the country's total land mass, its population of 10 million represents about 5% of country's residents, making the Baluch people the smallest ethnic minority in multiethnic Pakistan. The Baluch, together with their ethnic cousins, the Brahvis, comprise only 47% of the population of Baluchistan. The rest are Pashtuns (46%), Hazaras (Farsi speakers), Sindhis, and Punjabis. But Baluchi tribes stand out as vocal, aggressive, and at times defiant towards the central authority in Islamabad.

Over the years, Pakistan has faced insurgencies by Baluchi groups with secular and jihadist agendas, notably in 1948, 1958, and 1974. The current conflict, which started in 2004, primarily resulted from the highhanded policies of General Pervez Musharraf. This insurgency is secular in nature and bears no similarity to the Taliban insurgency in the country's north. The roots of these numerous revolts date from the period of British rule. The British authorities recognized and supported the institution of *Sardars* (heads of tribes) in an effort to extend their influence. Yet, the tribal revolts that have taken place since independence normally have focused on securing equal rights within the federation. At times, however, Baluch nationalists have sought complete independence from Pakistan — an agenda that has had negative regional repercussions, especially for Iran, where Tehran's relations with the Baluch minority is itself complicated.

Whereas Baluch nationalists have professed national "unity," they have pursued competing objectives and agendas. There is a long history of inter-tribal feuds leading to brutal murders, long-lasting vendettas, arson, and looting. The symbolic importance

1. The port of Gwadar changed hands in 1783 when it was gifted to Oman by the ruler of Kalat. In 1958, the Pakistani government ultimately purchased it back. As a result, Oman has a sizable Baluchi population working in different fields, including in the Omani armed forces and as palace guards.



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of the Baluch language to Baluch national identity and nationalist aspirations suffered a serious setback when the first provincial government adopted Urdu as a provincial language in 1974.²

Pakistan's weak political and federal structures made the Baluch susceptible to various anxieties: from deprivation-driven demand for legitimate constitutional rights to ideologically motivated groups emerging with a leftist ideology and leaning towards the Soviet Union. Lengthy periods of centralized dictatorial military rule kept the Baluch tribes from the decision-making process and hindered their political maturation. *Sardars* have led ordinary Baluchis, most of whom are illiterate and poor, to believe that the policies of the federal government and the province of Punjab are responsible for their misery. However, on the numerous occasions these tribal *Sardars* and *Nawabs* (a title conferred for services rendered to the British Raj) had the chance to govern, but produced little change.

Baluchistan had calmed in the immediate post-Musharraf democratic period, providing hope that its chronic sense of deprivation and frustration was near redress. But this has not been the case. The government has been too slow to act — busy consolidating its strength in all parts of Pakistan, even where it needed to pause and compromise. In recent months, much

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has been said and written about the volatile situation in parts of Baluchistan, but the federal and provincial governments have taken few, if any, steps even to understand the real issues. The killings of three Baluch nationalist leaders in April 2009 added fuel to the fire, triggering protest marches and strikes in the far-flung areas of the province. Protest meetings in solidarity with the slain also were held in Lahore, Islamabad, and Karachi.

The highlight of the current situation was Interior Advisor Rehman Malik's April 23 explanations of the killings and other happenings in Baluchistan at a closed-door Senate session, which was rejected by Baluch Senators. Well known and respected Senator Hasil Bizenjo of the National Party remarked

after the session that the government had not addressed the real issues of Baluchistan and that Malik's allegation of foreign involvement required more evidence.

The troubles in Baluchistan are taking place at a time when Pakistan is threatened by further intrusion of the Taliban into the settled areas of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP). Against this background, attending to the problems in Baluchistan is urgently necessary. This requires, first of all, recognizing that a large segment of the Baluch population feels aggrieved, and that a common source of this frustration is the belief that the province receives little attention from the government and a smaller share of resources than are due. It is also important to recognize who actually rules Baluchistan — neither the government nor bureaucrats imported from other provinces, but a team of Baluch tribal *Sardars* and representatives of the people.

2. At that time, the Baluchi language did not have a script. In addition, there are various dialects among the Baluch tribes with Barahvi being a dialect of Dravidian origin. The Baluch population has greater illiteracy than the Baluchistani Pashtuns; therefore, the introduction of the Baluchi language, even if possible, cannot have any meaningful results. In any case, since the Baluch are a minority in the province, they would be unable to enforce their language on the majority.

In the past few months the Zardari government has made several half-hearted attempts to address the convulsions in Pakistan's largest and most strategic province. The government tried to repair the damage inflicted by its predecessor's murder of a Baluch tribal chief, Akbar Bugti, and other "anti-Baluch" policies. President Zardari publicly apologized to the people of the province for past unjust practices and promised to constitute a commission to take stock of the demands of the Baluchi people. On his first visit to Quetta, President Zardari announced a development package of Rs 46.6 billion for the province, and promised more to come.

There is no doubt that Baluchistan should be a top priority of the government, notwithstanding the challenges of confronting militants in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Swat. The following steps could help improve the dismal situation in Baluchistan and to bring its people into the national mainstream both in socioeconomic and political terms:

- An all-party conference should be convened without delay to discuss all aspects of Baluchistan province. There should be no time limit for the meeting. Every opinion should be heard, especially those from the aggrieved province. The conference must include intellectuals, the media, and other personalities.
- The activities of intelligence agencies should cease immediately. By interfering in domestic affairs, these agencies have done more harm than good to Pakistan.
- The Concurrent List should be removed from the Constitution, forthwith. The province should be given more autonomy as provided under the original 1973 Constitution.
- The Senate should be made a more powerful legislative body, thereby acting on the promise of a true federation.
- The National Finance Commission (NFC) must allocate resources according to the requirements of the provinces. Punjab already has conceded its stance of making population the basis for the distribution of resources.
- Baluchistan needs "freedom" from some of its "anti-development" *Sardars*. The people of the province should be involved in massive developmental projects. In the past these *Sardars* and *Nawabs* usurped Baluch resources, leaving the people poor, illiterate, and frustrated.

In his visit to Quetta, President Zardari remarked: "My government won't hesitate to make constitutional amendments in the light of legislators' recommendations to solve problems of the province." However, little has come of these promises. In any case, the urgency of redress is much slower than the speed of events, violent and otherwise, that are taking place on a daily basis.