

THE RE-EMERGENCE OF THE BALUCH MOVEMENT IN PAKISTAN

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INTRODUCTION

1. The Baluch movement in Pakistan, after a dormant period of almost two decades, has been reignited with renewed vigour and threatens to destabilise Pakistan and potentially cause problems with regional security and economic development in South Asia. This paper will:
 - a. provide an overview of the Baluch movement in Pakistan;
 - b. explain some of the causes that have propelled and sustained the movement; and
 - c. consider the implications of the resurgence of this movement over the last few years on the stability of Pakistan and the region.

OVERVIEW OF THE BALUCH MOVEMENT IN PAKISTAN

2. Baluchistan, situated on the southwest border of Pakistan, is the traditional homeland of the Baluch. It is a vast area covering 222,000 square kilometres and occupying almost 43% of Pakistan's total land area. Baluchistan is a land abounding in natural resources with large reserves of gas, minerals, fisheries, and coal. Apart from its wealth in natural resources, Baluchistan is also geo-strategically very significant, given its location.
3. It shares borders with Afghanistan to the northwest and Iran to the west. Apart from regional importance, Baluchistan has always been relevant at the international level during the Cold War and now in the era of global terrorism. Its coastline is along the Persian Gulf and, significantly, it is along the major sea lanes near the Straits of Hormuz through which about 40% of the world's oil tankers pass.

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4. The Baluch are a tribal minority and constitute a mere 5% of Pakistan's population. The Baluch are fiercely protective of their identity and take great pride in their community bonds, tribal affiliations, language, folk lore and community. There are 17 major tribal groups and many sub-groups. Each major group is headed by Sardar, who is a leader of the group and exercises considerable authority.
5. Baluchistan remains the most underdeveloped region as evidenced by the socio-economic growth indicators – health, literacy, civic amenities, industrial infrastructure and per capita income which point to its backwardness and underdevelopment. For example, literacy rates in Baluchistan have always lagged behind the national average. In 1981, literacy rate in Baluch was 10% while national average was 26%. Even as recently as 2004-05, Baluchistan's literacy rate was the lowest (37%) as compared with other provinces (Sindh 56%, Punjab 55%, north western frontier province 45%) and the national average at 53%.

BACKGROUND AND CAUSES OF THE MOVEMENT

6. The Baluch have been involved in many armed rebellions against the federal government, with the last major insurgency in the 1970s, which was largely fuelled by the Baluch's perception of disenfranchisement by the federal government in terms of their economic, social and political expectations.

The Baluch Perspective

7. Economically, the Baluch feel the central government in Pakistan is treating Baluchistan as a colony, exploiting its resources without sharing the benefits. Natural gas was discovered in the Sui fields in the province in 1953 and by 1964, the gas was being piped to Multan and Rawalpindi in Punjab. Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan, received none of the gas from its own land until 1986.
8. Baluchistan also does not receive a fair share of the royalties from its natural resources. The federal government has under-priced Baluch gas, as compared with other provinces and, further, has only paid 12% of the royalties due. The Baluch have been demanding a revision of royalties on Sui gas which have remained the same since 1952.
9. Socially, most Baluch feel that they are marginalised in their own land. The federal government, dominated by Punjabis, has allowed many Punjabi civilian and military personnel posted to Baluchistan to buy prime land in the province.
10. Development projects which were launched by the federal government such as the Pat Feeder canal, RCD highway and Hub-chowki were viewed with suspicion. For example, there was cynicism that the Hub-Chowki project was not intended to benefit the Baluch. It was located near the border with Sindh, close to Karachi and has attracted mainly non-Baluch workers. The development of infrastructure, especially construction of roads to connect Baluchistan with other provinces, was also seen as a means to provide access to the central government to penetrate Baluchistan and control it, rather than to facilitate development.

11. Politically, Baluch discontentment and feelings of relative deprivation have functioned at two levels – the federal level and the provincial level. The federal government is largely Punjabi and the Baluch feel that the Punjabis are disproportionately represented in terms of wielding power at the centre. At the provincial level, the ire was directed towards the Pashtuns who flooded the province after the Afghanistan crisis in the 1980s. The Pashtuns soon dominated the business sectors, especially construction and transport.
12. Apart from being socio-economically disadvantaged, the Baluch are also politically disenfranchised at the provincial and central levels, with poor representation in the civil service and armed forces. For example, in 1972, only 5% of the provincial civil service in Baluchistan itself was made up of Baluch.
13. At the federal level, a quota system was implemented by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to facilitate proportionate representation of all provinces in the civil service. This operated to the disadvantage of the Baluch due to the fact that the Baluchistan population only constituted a very small percentage of the national population and further, the Pashtuns and Punjabis domiciled in Baluchistan were able to count themselves under the Baluchistan provincial quota, further diluting ethnic Baluch representation.

The Pakistani Government's Perspective

14. The Pakistani government views the Baluch as an insular community that is unwilling to break away from its tribal ways and integrate into the national mainstream.
15. The government has been pumping vast amounts of money into the province to boost development and to win over the Baluch. For example, during the 1970s, when the insurgency was at its height, the government raised its grant-in-aid from Pakistan Rs12.6 million in 1971-72 to Pakistan Rs717.2 million in 1978-79. Government officials maintain that much of the money was embezzled along the way at the provincial level and did not reach the people.
16. There is also a strongly held view that tribal chiefs have politicised development issues in order to maintain the status quo and thus preserve their power. It is always in the interest of leaders of discontented groups to ensure that conflict continues, as that guarantees their leadership positions as well as access to funds and support. As one government official put it recently, "While the tribesmen remain in primitive conditions, the leader of the Bugti tribe, Sardar Nawab Bugti and his family enjoy scores of other perks and privileges."
17. Whatever the views of both parties, the reality is that the Baluch feel a strong sense of injustice and this perception has not been fully addressed by the Pakistani government, which is why history is repeating itself. This paper compares the 1970s insurgency with the present to highlight the common features that sustain this movement and to speculate on possible future scenarios based on new variables in the equation.

RESURGENCE OF THE BALUCH MOVEMENT

18. The Baluch are presently in the midst of another crisis that gained momentum in 2004. The civil war of the 1970s and the present insurgency have many striking parallels and most of the issues that dominated the 1970s civil war have also contributed to the present crisis. Underdevelopment of the province, lack of economic and political participation at the national and provincial levels, exploitation of the province and lack of trust between the Baluch and the federal government are common themes in both cases.

Commonalities with the 1970s Insurgency

19. In the past, projects such as the Pat Feeder Canal and Hub-Chowki were seen as generating employment for non-Baluch and to serve the strategic interest of the federal government. Similar suspicions surround today's projects. For example, the construction of the new port at Gwadar and the Ormara Naval base along the Mekran coast has raised several concerns.
20. The Gwadar port project has been controlled exclusively by the federal government, with negligible participation by Baluch, thus depriving them of any meaningful role in the development process. Gwadar, which also has a defence and strategic function, could see an increased presence of the Pakistani military in the region, and this raises concerns amongst the Baluch of greater interference by the federal government. It also risks diluting the Baluch's presence, with the influx of people from other provinces seeking employment opportunities.
21. The Baluch already feel deprived of employment opportunities at Gwadar. For example, of the 600 people employed in the first phase of the project, only 100 of them were Baluch, largely in the lower end jobs. Nawab Akbar Bugti, the late veteran leader of the Baluch movement, had lamented that even though "the government had promised that all jobs that the locals could do would be given to them...people are being brought in, even for unskilled labour." Similarly, the Ormara naval base project has hardly involved the Baluch.
22. Related to the Gwadar project is the fear that Baluch are being dispossessed of their land. The government acquired the land around the port at below-market value and distributed much of it to navy and coastguard personnel who are largely non-Baluch. It has also created a speculative market, with the cost of land in Gwadar soaring. According one newspaper report, a 500 square yard plot that used to cost US\$130 has shot up to US\$7,000.
23. A further parallel to the 1970s insurgency is seen in the Baluch's response to the high-handed approach of the Pakistani government. In 1973, the Bhutto government decided to flex its muscles by dismissing the provincial government in Baluchistan and following that with a massive military offensive in 1974. These actions triggered a civil war and insurgents resorted to guerrilla warfare tactics, blocked main roads, disrupted rail links and obstructed oil drilling and survey operations. The federal government responded with all its might and, with assistance from Iran, managed to quell the uprising and eventually took full control of Baluchistan. It arrested the three

main leaders – Ghouse Bakhsh Bizenjo, Khair Bux Marri and Ataullah Mengal – and stationed the Pakistan army in the province to restore order.

24. In the recent escalations of violence from 2004, the Baluch forces have resorted to similar tactics. In January 2006, the rape of a female doctor by Pakistani soldiers in a Sui hospital complex sparked off widespread protests and Baluch guerrillas attacked railway lines, gas supply lines and gas installations affecting gas supply to the rest of the country, and causing power failure in the capital city of Quetta and other areas. The Pakistani military responded with full force, killing many of the insurgents, and ultimately leading to the death of Akbar Bugti.

Differences with the 1970s Insurgency

25. There are some critical differences which could make the picture more complex and complicate matters for the Pakistani government. In the 1970s, the insurgency declined for a variety of reasons. For one, Zia's multi-pronged policy of coercion, co-option and conciliation turned the tide in Baluchistan in favour of the federal government. Second, there were intra- and inter-group cleavages and clashes of personalities, ideologies, strategies and goals of the various leaders.
26. The Pakistan National Party, successor to the old National Awami Party was formed under Bizenjo and argued for greater provincial autonomy for Baluchistan. Another organisation, the Baluch People's Liberation Front wanted to create a greater Baluchistan to include the Baluch in Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. A third group called the Baluch Students Organisation wanted an independent Baluchistan.
27. These differences were exploited by Zia who managed to buy out some of the Baluch who were by now directionless. The movement also had never enjoyed wide popular support as it was driven by a few tribes. Finally, the movement failed because it did not enjoy sufficient external support to advance their cause. Afghanistan was experiencing its own crisis in the late 1970s and Iran was in favour of the Pakistani government as it did not want the insurgency to spread to its own Baluch population. India had no real incentive to help the Baluch although it was willing to exploit the situation in its conflict with Pakistan.
28. Today, the situation is very different. The Baluch are no longer as fragmented and guerrilla fighting is being carried out under the aegis of the Baluch Liberation Army (BLA), which comprises the Marri, Bugti and Mengal tribes. In the 1970s, there was some friction and rivalry between these tribes, whereas today, there is much greater cooperation. Indeed, when Bugti's tribal territory came under attack by Pakistani troops, the Marris offered him sanctuary in their tribal area. This suggests much greater cohesion and cooperation amongst the various Baluch tribes.
29. The BLA has also attracted many educated Baluch from a middle class background into its fold and the leadership also appears to be more united in pursuing the goal of greater provincial autonomy. The four main Baluch political parties [Baluch National Party (Mengal), the Baluch National Party, the National Party and Nawab Akbar Bugti's party, the Jamhoori Watan Party(JWP)] have come together for a common cause under the umbrella of Baloch Ittehad.

30. This could make it more difficult for President Musharraf to exploit differences between the various tribes, which General Zia was able to do successfully in the 1970s, as described above. Furthermore, the Baluch are now better equipped with heavy weaponry and sophisticated equipment.
31. More importantly, the biggest difference between the 1970s and now is that the Pakistani military is stretched to its maximum, as it is engaged on three visible fronts – the US-led global war on terrorism in the north-western frontier province and the Afghan border, the Line of Control in Kashmir and the revived Baluch insurgency.
32. Further, the external support dimension may also be very different. In the 1970s, Pakistan had received assistance from Iran but it may be less likely for such assistance to be forthcoming, especially if the Baluch make it clear that their goal now is only for greater provincial autonomy and not an independent or greater Baluchistan, which could have repercussions in Iran. There is also speculation that Al-Qaeda is moving into Baluchistan and there is therefore a possibility of the United States forces collaborating with Pakistan to enter Baluchistan both to fight Al-Qaeda and, more relevantly, to prepare for a potential strike against Iran. The United States rhetoric on Iran lends credence to this speculation, and it may, therefore, be in Iran's interest to ensure that Baluchistan does not come under the full control of the Pakistani military.
33. Iran, in collaboration with India, has built the Chabahar port to compete with the Gwadar port in order to remain a key player in the shipping routes and energy trading related to Central Asia. Any conflict that delays the Gwadar port project could be viewed as advantageous to both Iran and India.
34. In terms of India, it is likely that it is providing active support for the Baluch. India's interest may not be in de-stabilising Baluchistan per se but there are some collateral benefits to India. First, the Gwadar port is clear competition to the Chabahar port in which India has an interest. Second, India has a strategic interest in checking the extension of Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean region which the Chinese may be able to achieve through their involvement in the Gwadar port. The strengthening of relations between China and Pakistan will also be viewed with concern by India. Third, prolonging or intensifying the Baluch conflict may compel Pakistan to increase its military engagement in the area. This may result in Pakistan having to divert some its military resources away from its conflict with India over Kashmir.
35. Thus, the new Baluch crisis, while arising from the same causes as the earlier crisis, is operating in a geo-political environment that is different and therefore may be less predictable. While it is too early to draw any conclusions, one can however imagine several possible scenarios.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE INSURGENCY ON PAKISTAN AND SOUTH ASIA

36. First, the killing of Bugti could well intensify Baluch operations against the Pakistani government and provide a rallying point for future Baluch generations. President Musharraf's recently vowed to get Bugti, saying, "I do not consider him Nawab (baron) any more, he and two other tribal chieftains are indulging in anti-state activities with the help of foreign money and weapons. We will soon sort them out."

Soon after, Bugti died at the hands of the Pakistani military. This could well make a martyr out of the late Baluch leader.

37. Second, if the Baluch do incline towards greater militancy, it will lead to a protracted struggle rather than a quick solution to the problem. Provoking a more intense or lasting confrontation could be disastrous to Pakistan's economic stability, as Pakistan is already spending a huge proportion of its finances on domestic and cross-border conflicts.
38. Third, the new crisis could provide Al Qaeda with a strategic opportunity to exploit differences between the Baluch and the federal government to undermine President Musharraf. The Baluch are essentially secular in outlook and have in the past not shown an inclination to join hands with Islamic fundamentalist elements. However, with the Al-Qaeda now using Baluchistan as a base for its operations, there is a risk that the Baluch will cooperate with Al-Qaeda/Taliban forces for strategic reasons, thus enhancing the internal security threat in Pakistan. President Musharraf is in a difficult position as he balances the various competing interests of Pakistan's domestic politics and the United States' strategic interests in its war on terrorism.
39. Fourth, a continued military confrontation in Baluchistan could spill over to neighbouring Sindh which has been tense in the past, and trigger ethnic disturbances. These could have an adverse impact on the already fragile political and economic fabric of the country.
40. Fifth, the killing of Bugti could also provide an opportunity for pro-democracy forces to get together and work against the military regime. Already, leaders of the main opposition parties, such as Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA) and Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy have found common cause in cooperating with each other and are pressing for the setting up of a judicial commission to probe into the death of Bugti. The MMA had differences with Bugti and his party, JWP, in the past, but Bugti's killing has brought the democratic elements together against the military establishment. This could have important implications for the forthcoming elections of 2007 which will be a litmus test for President Musharraf and the pro-democracy forces.
41. Sixth, the Pakistan army could use force and successfully quell the rebellion as it did in the past. However, this will not guarantee any permanent solution. In the 1970s, Pakistan did manage to subdue the insurgents, but as we are witnessing, the insurgency has resurfaced.
42. Seventh, apart from the heavy cost to both the Baluch and the Pakistani state, this ethnic conflict may have broader implications on the region as a whole, as any instability in Pakistan will have a ripple effect on South Asian regional peace and security. Ethnicity in this region is heavily interlinked and a flare-up in Baluchistan could quite easily spread across borders.
43. Eighth, if, as contemplated above, the Al-Qaeda-Baluch nexus develops, it could well be the tinderbox of fundamentalist terrorism that will engulf the region. Given the interconnectedness of oil and gas pipelines, ports and trade routes, the entire South and Central Asian regions could well end up being hostage to a continued Baluch crisis.

CONCLUSION

44. The Baluch crisis is not going to fade away by itself. To resolve the problem, the government will have to allay the apprehensions of the Baluch and give them a vital stake in being part of the political and economic process of the country. At the end of the day, perceptions are very important and unless both sides are able to arrive at a mutual understanding and demonstrate a genuine willingness to improve relations with each other, the problems will remain.
45. The Baluch movement may wax and wane depending on the prevalent situation. In most ethnic conflicts, it is the nature of the movement which includes its organisational structure and leadership that ultimately decides its future.
46. The state also plays a crucial role in exacerbating or reducing ethnic tensions – the nature and timeliness of the state's response will determine whether the movement is contained or assumes a more confrontational form. Finally external support also remains a crucial factor in fostering an ethnic movement.
47. The interplay of all these factors has decided the fate of the Baluch movement in the past and it is suggested that similar dynamics will help to shape the course of the movement in the future.
