

No calm for Balochistan?

Islamabad's political plexus, enduring anxieties, and the fruitlessness of regional aspirations



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Islamabad is reaping all the benefits, depriving the locals from their legitimate share! In brief, this popular statement among critics of the political plexus of the country's establishment summarises much of the grievances of the Baloch people towards Pakistan's national government. But besides the fact that this sentiment is in line with the core rational of conflictual relations between the center and its obstinate periphery, it only partially reflects the multidimensional and multi-layered conflict in Balochistan today.

Doubtless, Balochistan is a region of contradictory extremes: With 43 per cent of the country's land-mass Balochistan is the largest of Pakistan's four provinces (besides Sindh, Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa/former NWFP) but also the least populated region (with around 6 million inhabitants, Baloch only amount to 4 per cent of the total population). It is strategically well placed but does not receive in-depth prioritising within security circles. It is rich in energy and mineral resources, but it is at the same time Pakistan's least developed and industrialised region with the lowest level of literacy and income with over 80 per cent of the population living beneath the poverty line. Beside the fact that there are strong elements of secularism and anti-religious-extremism as well as pro-Pakistan sentiments, it is the country's most troubled area finding its expression in severe militant responses towards Islamabad combined with a remarkable increase in violence against non-Baloch, ethnic and religious minorities.

How have these antagonistic trajectories developed over time? Did they only surface due to the unfortunate historical legacies or political misguidance of the post-colonial era, which was marked by more than six decades of unsuccessful, repressive policies leading to the suppression of Baloch aspirations of autonomy?

Having this puzzle in mind, the line of argumentation made here is that the Baloch conflict is a 'logical response' to the challenge of being a marginalised subordinated part in a highly centralised system of governance, first imposed by the British colonial rule and later continued by the Pakistani government after a forced integration; not only undermining their quest for independence but also taking away the quasi-autonomous status. Due to an 'enduring anxiety' of national disintegration, there is an unwillingness of Islamabad's political and military estab-

lishment to allow any substantial regional autonomy, thus depriving the Baloch people of their legitimate rights. The government in Islamabad is worsening the situation by depriving the province of a fair share of revenue distribution natural resources. Furthermore, the Punjabi dominated national establishment also ousted the Baloch from local decision-making and implementation processes by appointing bureaucrats from Sindh and Punjab to the provincial institutions and authorities, especially the local security forces. In addition Islamabad does not shy away from dismissing 'inconvenient' provincial governments. Subsequently, the electoral process has lost significance for the Baloch as a form of expressing their political will. In brief, they treated Balochistan like an internal colony, the same strategy which the Punjabi dominated government applied to its former East-Pakistan wing until it fought successfully for its independence. Last but not least, decisions regarding Balochistan are made in a framework of a tense civil-military relationship which does not favour a sustainable political solution. In consequence, Baloch (leaders) had no share in the existing state power structure, forcing them to turn towards an 'own state entity', either through more autonomy or by creating an own separate state.

However, to be able to understand this conundrum one has to take the complex and long history of the Balochistan crisis into account. As many separatist, subnational and autonomous tendencies in South Asia, also Baloch nationalism can be traced back to colonial times. In consequence of the 'Great Game' during the 19th century, the largely autonomous (Baloch) princely state of Kalat was forcibly divided between Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Additionally, the part which remained in Pakistan was absorbed by the British Raj in 1884, an act which was repeated by the newly independent Pakistani authorities. This chain of events initiated a historical legacy which is still very much alive today; it is hence no surprise that this trajectory currently influences Pakistani politics. In this context one has to mention, that the then Khan of Kalat Nasi Khan was able to organise the Baloch in a 'greater organised entity' for the first time. The core of this 'quasi-state structure' was a military-administrative based alliance of a significant part of Baloch tribes in order to establish a unified army. However, despite the fact that it was not

really a nation state of the Baloch people with a fixed setup of a political-bureaucratic framework, it gave birth to the ideational roots of Baloch nationalism by giving a concrete, historical-institutional point of reference.

By evaluating the historical patterns of coercive force as political instrument, it is not surprising that the current armed confrontations in Balochistan are hardly a new phenomenon. Post-colonial Pakistan witnessed four insurgencies: First, between 1947 and 1948, after the Khan of Kalat declared independence on August 15, 1947 and after several months of war Kalat was annexed forcefully by Pakistan. Second, from 1958 to 1959, after the martial law regime sent its troops into

rising suspicion regarding foreign actors in Balochistan.

Now, a fifth insurgency is under way in the form of a more or less 'low intensity conflict' which however carries high potential to turn into a large scale mass upheaval at any time, like after a rape of a female doctor in a hospital in Sui by Pakistani soldiers resulted in a major attack on the nearby gas installations in early 2005 as well as other violent incidents in other parts of the province.

Since then, the insurgency which started already in 2004 is picking up more steam with each violent clash, worsening the security situation and deteriorating the socio-economic conditions of all people living in Balochistan. The robust response of the Pakistan secu-

But due to incompetence and corruption among civilian institutions and subordinated authorities, politicians and bureaucrats continue to rely on the army and (military) intelligence in maintaining law and order. In consequence they are losing significant decision-making power when it comes to policy formulation and implementation towards Balochistan. Therefore, it seems that civilians have not much room to manoeuvre to work towards a non-security dominated approach. However, with or without civilian control it seems that there is no remarkable difference between civilians, the 'elected representatives' of the people in Islamabad or the generals in Rawalpindi in their approach towards

eral elements into the political-administrative system, described as 'fissiparous tendencies' (Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto) which were identified as sources of instability and essential challenges towards national unity and integration. Promising measures like Raza Rabbani's 18th Amendment to Pakistan's Constitution, the 7th National Finance Commission Award (NFC), the Aghaz-e-Haqooq-e-Balochistan package (or 'Baluchistan conciliation package') mark some important efforts on paper but fail to produce significant changes towards worthwhile decentralisation in reality. This is unfortunate since the package was trying to deal with many of the most pressing challenges of the Balochistan conflicts. Some of the 'ignored issues' are giving priority and control over natural resources, broadcasting and telecasting infrastructure to the provincial government, starting a sustainable dialogue for peace with the Baloch, and facilitating the return of exiled dissidents. Furthermore, the investigation of activities by Pakistan's security agencies, particularly the role of the paramilitary Frontier Corps Baluchistan, the regular Army and intelligence services, the 'missing' political activists and target killings e.g. of key figures like Nawab Akbar Bugti in August 2006, the most visible face of the current Baloch resistance, who was not only a Tumandar (tribal chief) of the largest Baloch tribe, the Bugti, but also a strong proponent of autonomy, or Nawabzada Balach Marri, the elusive commander of the secretive, shadowy Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), in November 2007. Witnessing numerous extrajudicial killings by Islamabad's law enforcing agencies Baloch people are starting to press very hard towards an immediate tracing and release of political prisoners and/or 'missing persons'. Another important demand is an increased participation of Baloch people and the introduction of a provincial consent in decision-making processes especially when it comes to major development processes in their province. In this direction, one of the most debatable issues is the Gwardar port project.

A case which not only emphasizes the international dimension of the Baluchistan conflict but also the strong Chinese influence in Pakistan, especially in troubled but strategically well located areas like Gwardar near the mouth of the Straits of Hormuz. The accusation of illegal allotment of land in Gwardar by Islamabad's stakeholders is just another example for

sidelining the Baloch in significant decisions concerning their province. Furthermore, a 'demilitarisation process' has to be started which includes the withdrawal of troops, the stop of building new cantonments, and limiting the performance of the Coast Guards to their primary duties, e.g. only controlling the borders under the Customs Acts.

In this context one must state that the recently announced 'reanimation' and intensified implementation of the Balochistan package by the end of 2013 remains highly unlikely taking into account - in addition to the lack of motivation - the poor governance performance of successive regimes in developing the country into account. In consequence, the half-hearted measures of Islamabad are not only fruitless but further alienate the Baloch.

Nevertheless, one must also state that the conflict has become much more complex over the years, especially due to the increasing number of actors involved not only international but also local ones. Therefore, the conflict is not anymore only about the centre and periphery, Baloch versus Islamabad. It is also about international rivalries, Baloch versus non-Baloch living in Balochistan, and last but not least it involves conflicts between Baloch versus Baloch divided through different cleavages like attitude towards Islamabad, significance of autonomy or separatism, use of violence as a political tool etc. As a result, the prospect of any form of political solution is becoming increasingly remote. However, the establishment in Islamabad will never accept a separation of Balochistan. Observing the imbalance of military capabilities of the combatants involved, there are no doubts that Balochistan will remain part of Pakistan. But as long as Islamabad does not spend more efforts in finding a political solution the armed conflict and the deterioration of the security and socio-economic situation will prevail over a stabilised development. Subsequently, Balochistan will continue to pose a major challenge for the stability of all future national governments and preserve the influence of the military in politics. To sum up, as long as there is no peace and respect for human rights in Balochistan there will be no democracy worth the name in Pakistan.

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Kalat in order to arrest the Khan as well as to disarm the tribesman, which inevitably led to violent clashes and unrest. Third, in 1962-63, after refuting the election results of the then introduced system of 'Basic Democrats' by the military regime in Islamabad which led to several upheavals like a left wing revolutionary revolt known as the "Parari Movement". Fourth, between 1973 and 1977 where the provincial government were dismissed after being accused of supporting anti-Pakistan activities. Subsequently Balochistan was put under governor's rule, meaning under direct control of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who at the time was ruling in an increasingly autocratic style.

This four year long conflict led to the death of 55000 Baloch fighters, either involved in randomly coordinated tribal resistance groups or well organised and trained units. Currently one could also see

forces did not only lead to massive human rights violations (many observers are claiming the existence of 'kill and dump activities') but also initiated yet another vicious circle of accusations and violence, from both sides.

However, in order to understand why history is repeating itself in Pakistan and why elites are unable or unwilling to learn from the past one has to take a closer look at Islamabad's political plexus.

One of the major problems is that Pakistan presents itself as a typical case of failed civilian supremacy and any form of institutionalised civilian control. Therefore, civilians have to tread dangerous waters in order to balance different interests and power relations within the security-governance nexus. On one side, they try to weaken the army's grip on power in Pakistan, on the other side in order to keep the internal security situation under control, they have to "eschew reliance with them".

Balochistan. Here one has to state that both, politicians and soldiers, belong to the same type of establishment which is trapped in an 'enduring anxiety', a phenomenon especially significant, since it comes along with an absence of long-term strategic visions in all policy fields. Having the impression of being sandwiched by arch enemy India and a hostile Afghanistan, there is a tendency to permanently evoke a sense of suspiciousness, heated exaggeration, and conspiratorial fantasies in the areas of external defense and internal security. Moreover, the notion that both states are trying 'to slice the Pakistani pie' established an extremely narrow and inflexible mind-set when it comes to the incorporation of more rights, freedoms and autonomy/self-governance for the provinces in general and Balochistan in particular.

Subsequently, Pakistan security circles are allergic towards the adoption of fed-