

# Fight for the rights

## Pakistan's Balochistan province

The problems facing the troubled province of Balochistan are complex and diverse. **Animesh Roul** examines the challenges, including the conflict between the province's nationalists and the state, that illustrate Pakistan's struggle for control of the region.

### ► KEY POINTS

- The Pakistani province of Balochistan is riven by numerous ethno-political faultlines, including Baloch nationalism, sectarian schisms, Pashtun separatism, and incipient 'Talibanisation'.
- Alleged human rights abuses by agents of the Pakistani state are widespread and recurrent, fuelling further animosity.
- Belated engagement by Islamabad with Baloch nationalists and efforts to clamp down on extra-judicial killings will bring some respite, although increasing Taliban influence will remain a concern for all parties.

**T**he strategically located region of Balochistan, historically riven by mutinies and underdevelopment, illustrates many of Pakistan's shortcomings in exercising territorial control. Sparsely populated, the southwestern province is geographically the largest in Pakistan, with abundant reserves of hydrocarbons (oil and gas) and minerals (copper, gold, chromites, zinc, and uranium). Bordering Afghanistan to the north, Iran to the west, and flanked by the Arabian Sea to the south, it is experiencing a nationalist

insurgency that often oscillates between a struggle for autonomy and armed secession.

This conflict has brought enormous suffering to the Baloch people as they struggle to assert their ethnic identity in the most neglected province of Pakistan, where a majority of the population (including Balochi, Sindhi, Pashtun, Hazara, and Punjabi ethnicities) lacks basic amenities and many within society remain alienated and marginalised. A mid-September 2012 visit of the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) refocused global attention on Balochistan. In recent years, the province has been plagued by multiple crises, such as nationalistic uprisings, internecine fighting, state-sponsored abductions, extra-judicial killings, human right abuses, forced disappearances, and sectarian killings. Of late, the province has become a base for pro-Taliban elements, operating beyond the frontiers of Pakistan, who may have been encouraged by Pakistani agencies to counter the secular Baloch movement. The problems ailing Balochistan are therefore complex and diverse, and often respond to the federal government's semi-detached approach to tackling the region's challenges.

### Stirrings of revolt

Historically, the crisis in Balochistan can be traced back to India's move to independence

from British rule in 1947, when one of the princely states, Kalat, refused to join Pakistan under the British arrangement of dividing India. Forceful annexation nevertheless defused the immediate crisis, but it again returned to haunt Pakistan a decade later, in 1958, when Nawab Nowroz Khan, head of the Zarakzai tribe, resorted to arming a resistance against Pakistan's 'One Unit' policy, which merged Balochistan, the North West Frontier Province, Punjab, and Sindh into a single administrative unit as West Pakistan, thereby curtailing the power of tribal leaders. The ruler of Kalat, Mir Ahmad Yar Khan, revolted again, before the imposition of martial law in October 1958. During the ensuing years, the Baloch again consolidated along military lines to resist Pakistan's dominance and its exploitation of local mineral resources, resulting in a bloody insurgency that lasted until 1969. This was followed by a truce agreement and the recognition of Balochistan as the fourth province.

The fourth wave of the Baloch crisis erupted in the early 1970s, when then president Zulfikar Ali Bhutto dismissed the provincial government of Balochistan and imposed martial law. This led to the formation of armed groups such as the Balochistan People's Liberation Front (BPLF) under Khair Baksh Marri, which fought against the Pakistani army in the battle of the Chamalang in 1974.



Afghan Hazara protest against the killing of their own people in Pakistan, during a rally in Kabul, Afghanistan, on 7 October.

PA: 1457019

The present phase of the crisis, the “fifth insurgency”, can be dated back to 2003-2004, when waves of armed insurgencies emerged in Balochistan, led by two Baloch nationalist leaders representing their respective tribes, Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti and Mir Balach Marri. The situation reached crisis proportions as the militant Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) stepped up attacks against Pakistani security forces and power installations across the province. In retaliation, the Pakistani army unleashed a major offensive against the Bugti and Marri tribes. The BLA’s justification for the violence primarily centred on the Punjabi domination of every aspect of Baloch life, the exploitation of natural resources, and army excesses.

Baloch militant nationalist leaders subsequently renewed the decades-old Baloch nationalist struggle, demanding greater control of natural resources and urging then president Pervez Musharraf to suspend the construction of military bases in 2005. Subsequent assassination attempts on Musharraf during visits to the Kohlu area on 14 December prompted a calculated military crackdown on Baloch nationalists, ultimately leading to the death of Akbar Bugti in August 2006 and Balach Marri in November 2007. Excesses committed by the Pakistani army further fuelled the nationalist movement, while Baloch

militants carried out retribution attacks against Pakistan security forces, targeting gas pipelines and power grids. Apart from the BLA, other nationalist groups emerged to carry out armed resistance against Pakistan, including the Baloch Republican Army (BRA), the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF), and Lashkar-e-Balochistan (LeB). There are an estimated 121 secretly run training facilities for Baloch militants, nationalists, and insurgents (known as Farari camps) in different parts of Balochistan and another 30 camps are operating in Afghanistan, Frontier Corps (FC) Inspector General Major Obajdullah Khan Khattak told local media in June 2012.

### Separatist dynamics

According to the Pakistani government, Baloch insurgents – particularly the BLA – have been instrumental in killing 138 FC personnel, 89 police officers, and 872 civilians in 2012 at the time of going to press. There are at least eight nationalist political organisations that oppose parliamentary participation in Pakistan, including the Baloch National Movement, the Baloch Students Organisation, the Baloch Republican Party, and the Hazara Democratic Party. In February 2009, most of these revolutionary separatist entities came together to form a political alliance, the Baloch National Front, championing revolutionary

politics for an independent Balochistan. A plethora of foreign-based Baloch diaspora organisations using web-based social networking tools continue to highlight the Baloch struggle at a series of international forums.

Pakistan perceives the Baloch struggle as terrorism directed against the state and a threat to its territorial integrity, whereas Baloch nationalists consider the military to be an occupying force. The Baloch militants are also accused of targeting people of other ethnicities, particularly Punjabi and Pashtun settlers such as teachers, labourers and doctors, or travellers passing through the province on their way to Iran. However, Pakistani sources told *IHS Jane’s* that many attacks, particularly on Pashtuns, were not perpetrated by Baloch nationalist militants and may have been instigated by state forces or state-backed Baloch militants to malign the Baloch movement.

### Killings and disappearances

The Pakistani state has long engaged in a campaign of suppression that its critics claim has been marked by targeted assassinations, abductions, and extrajudicial killings, along with a military campaign against the insurgents. However, the military has repeatedly denied committing abuses and killings, placing the blame on the various militant and criminal groups active inside Balochistan. Sources in



Local residents at the scene of a burning police vehicle after a bomb explosion in Quetta, Pakistan, on 21 March 2010.

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Pakistan told *IHS Jane's* that the Pakistani army, intelligence agencies, and the paramilitary Frontier Corps virtually ran the provincial government in Balochistan and were reluctant to relinquish this power.

The disappearances and killings appear to be orchestrated by elements within Pakistan's state agencies, including the Frontier Corps and the Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI). According to human rights organisations, they have allegedly deployed shadow civilian hit squads such as the Tehreek-e-Nafaze-Aman Balochistan (TNAB) and the Baloch Muttahida Duffah Army (BMDA) to counter the overt Baloch nationalist movement. They target doctors, journalists, teachers, lawyers, and political activists indiscriminately. The TNAB is believed to be the armed wing of pro-government political organisation Mutahida Mahaz Balochistan (MMB).

According to an estimate by the non-governmental organisation Voice for Baloch Missing Persons (VFBMP), 14,385 persons have been missing since 2005 in Balochistan, while more than 400 tortured and mutilated corpses have been found since July 2010. On 30 August 2012, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) claimed that during the tenure of the incumbent government, as many as 450 mutilated corpses have been recovered and more than 1,300 people went missing in different areas of Balochistan. Even the Supreme Court of Pakistan observed on 19 September that there were allegations of the Frontier Corps' involvement in around 1,000 such cases, while rejecting a government report on the security situation in Balochistan.

Family members of civilian dissidents have also been targets of these extra-judicial killings within and outside Balochistan, exemplified by the killing on 31 January of family members

of Mir Bakhtiar Domki, a Balochistan member of the Provincial Assembly, who were shot dead near Gizri flyover in Karachi. The deceased were also relatives of the Baloch Republican Party (BRP) leader, Brahamdagh Khan Bugti, currently living in exile in Geneva, Switzerland. This incident was seen as a message from government-aligned forces to the exiled Brahamdagh Bugti, the last living Sardars (tribal leader) of the Bugti tribe, who is fighting for an independent Balochistan.

Pakistan's Supreme Court Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhary voiced his frustration in early April at the situation in Balochistan, noting how the 26,000 police and 50,000 Frontier Corps personnel stationed in the province had failed to restore law and order. "There is no difference between humans and animals in Balochistan, where mutilated bodies are discovered on a daily basis," he said.

### Talibanisation

Alongside the Baloch nationalist conflict, the issue of 'Talibanisation' and a resulting sectarian schism in the province have emerged as contemporary factors for further destabilisation. A sectarian dynamic has prevailed in the province since the late 1990s and this context in part explains how the Baloch nationalist insurgency provides enough justification for the Pakistan military to support the Taliban – to counter the involvement of both Afghanistan and India in Baloch affairs.

The Quetta Shura – the Afghan Taliban's powerful leaders acting as the government-in-exile – has operated from Balochistan's capital Quetta since 2001. Even though at the outset Pakistan denied its existence, in December 2009 the government admitted its presence and subsequently arrested many of its leaders. However, sources in Islamabad claimed to

*IHS Jane's* that Sunni extremists and Taliban elements active in Balochistan are often state-sponsored and espouse anti-nationalist (or anti-Baloch) sentiments in addition to a more traditional anti-Shia orientation. Meanwhile, sources close to the Baloch movement have told *IHS Jane's* that the 'Talibanisation' of the province will eventually bring the Taliban into conflict with the Baloch nationalists, and it is for this reason that Pakistan has been encouraging the propagation of religious teaching through mullahs and madrassahs.

Consequently, even though the conflict between the Baloch and the Pakistani state is ethnically based, sectarian violence in the province and elsewhere in Pakistan plays into the equation. The state may be seeking to promote Sunni Islam as a counterweight to ethnically based movements and politics.

The shadowy Taliban presence is manifested in growing religious intolerance in the province, with pro-Taliban and anti-Shia militant groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and Jundallah having an effectively free hand to attack religious minorities within the Hazara Shia population with impunity. For the religious militants, this acts as a counter to Baloch nationalism, which adheres to a more secular approach and enjoys good ties with the Hazara populace in the province.

Regarding the Shia population in Balochistan, which has some degree of Iranian patronage, the LeJ has openly declared all Shias as "wajib ul qati" (deserving to die). Markedly, attacks against members of the Hazara Shia community have spiked since 2009, centring mostly in and around Quetta (Hazara town and Mehrabad). Haji Abdul Qayyum Changezi, president of the Hazara National Jirga, suggested in early September that more than 800 Hazara had died between 1999 and 29 July 2012. The worst year was 2008, when nearly 300 Hazara Shias were killed in Balochistan. During the UN Working Group's September visit, a delegation of the Hazara Qaumi Jirga informed the visitors about the sectarian killings of the ethno-religious Hazara Shia minority and the government's inaction.

### Baloch v Pashtun nationalism

Until the mass exodus of Pashtun refugees to Southern Pakistan – particularly in the wake of the Afghan-Soviet war – the Baloch people lived peacefully with other minorities in the region, including the small number of Pashtuns in north Balochistan, bordering the present Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly the North West Frontier Province, or NWFP).

The secular and cultural credentials of the Baloch people meant that an undercurrent of ethnic tensions over space and identity arose. The situation escalated when Baloch nationalists opposed the Pakistan military's support for the Afghan mujahideen and subsequently the Taliban regime. Under the rule of former president Pervez Musharraf, the Pakistani military favoured the pro-Taliban Pashtuns over the Baloch people and supported the Pashtuns in the 2002 provincial elections. Balochis became suspicious of the then military regime's intentions in building the deep sea port at Gwadar, primarily for three reasons: the port could change the demography of the province, with non-Baloch workforce migration from other areas of Pakistan; it would be of little economic benefit to the Baloch people; and the government would use the pretext to fortify the province with new military bases and headquarters. Subsequently, Baloch nationalists saw a government – or Punjabi – conspiracy to marginalise the Baloch people by permanently changing the demographic profile of the region through favouring Pashtuns and other ethnicities.

The Baloch-Pashtun divide has widened ever since. Pashtuns, putatively backed by government forces, have realised their demographic potential as the second-largest community after the Baloch majority. This has implications for future power-sharing arrangements in the province, according to their constitutional rights. To date, however, the political movement is uniquely voiced by the Pashtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP), which works towards the realisation and restoration of Pashtun identity. The PkMAP has marked differences with the Baloch political entities over many societal and political issues. PkMAP chief Mahmood Khan Achakzai calls for a separate Pashtun province and equal rights for all Pashtuns living in Balochistan, whether this be in educational institutions or within parliament. The increasingly vocal demands of the Pashtun community mean that the co-existence of Baloch and Pashtun in the same province appears problematic.

Even though pro-Baloch leaders downplay the widening gulf with Pashtuns, both have blamed each other for impinging on their respective constitutional rights. Demands for a separate Pashtun district integrated with the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province or with neighbouring Afghanistan are gaining momentum. Sources in Pakistan told *IHS Jane's* that this would not be easy to achieve, with leaders such as Achakzai leading Pashtuns from the

front. Most of the Baloch political entity, pro-Pakistan or otherwise, considers the PkMAP's demands as unrealistic and wishful thinking.

### Outlook

Among the multiple conflicts within Balochistan, the most crucial remains the struggle between the province's nationalists and the Pakistani state. A major faction of the nationalists appears unwilling to settle for anything less than outright independence. However, the deaths of Bugti and Marri have impeded the Baloch national struggle in many ways, creating a sense of insecurity within the remaining leadership. Defections and in-fighting have created a divide within the Baloch movement, in the absence of charismatic leaders who can provide a coherent future strategy.

The Pakistani government is nevertheless making some serious attempts to bring back the Baloch people into its fold. Post-Musharraf, the civilian government in Islamabad has attempted political reconciliation with the Baloch people. The all-encompassing Aghaz-e-Haqooq-e-Balochistan (Beginning of Rights in Balochistan) package sponsored by the federal government and launched in November 2009 aims to address issues such as facilitating the return of political exiles to Pakistan and the release of Baloch political activists from unlawful detention. More importantly, it aims to launch a political dialogue with major Balochistan stakeholders. Yet the extent to which it has achieved these objectives since its launch in 2009 is open to debate.

A number of further initiatives by Islamabad could regain the confidence of the Baloch people. These include bringing the culprits of Akbar Bugti's killing to justice, ending military expansion inside Balochistan, and addressing local issues of development and deprivation. More immediately, however – and more importantly for the Baloch people – any serious move by central and provincial Pakistani governments to address disappearances and extra-judicial killings in the province, and to bring the perpetrators to justice, would instill greater Baloch faith in government agencies.

For the Baloch people, the Supreme Court's recent proactive role in addressing the core issue of disappearances and extra-judicial killings will bring some much-needed respite, ultimately helping to build trust if it actually takes steps to bring the perpetrators to justice. The powerful Pakistani military appears to be in denial, refusing to accept that any death squads are operating under its tutelage; if the atrocities continue even after the Supreme

Court's order to stop, then the Baloch militants would be likely to step up their armed struggle against the Pakistani state.

Meanwhile, the Talibanisation of Balochistan will remain a serious issue for all ethnicities, whether they be Baloch, Pashtuns, or Hazaras, and it could contribute to the growing sectarian schism within the province in future. Pashtuns are aware that the Pakistani state is supporting the Taliban as a counterweight and they are likely to drum up the issue of marginalisation at the hands of Baloch in the forthcoming elections. The issue of a new Pashtun province could stifle the larger Baloch nationalist struggle in the longer run, as Islamabad would seize the opportunity to divide the stakeholders and rule with ease a smaller Balochistan province.

On a positive note, a government initiative of political and social reconciliation is ongoing, exemplified by a visit by former provincial chief minister Akhtar Mengal to the Pakistan capital Islamabad in late September. The government seems to be more serious about bridging the differences with pro-nationalist Baloch leaders through a process of dialogue. Nevertheless, the demand for political autonomy seems achievable in the immediate future; any spoiler would come from the dissidents, as it would be difficult to persuade them to participate in the government-sponsored dialogue process. Externally, it remains unlikely that most of the exiled pro-Baloch hardliners – such as Dr Allah Nazar, Munir Mengal and Barahamdagh Bugti – will accept the government's efforts, sticking to their agenda to achieve nothing less than an independent Balochistan. ■

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