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## BALUCHISTAN ISSUE: BETWEEN MOVEMENT FOR BASIC RIGHTS & A FAILED INSURGENCY

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### Abstract

Baluchistan is a strategically significant province of Pakistan. Since its accession to Pakistan, it has observed a low level of insurgence from time to time. It has never been a full-scale insurgence that could sustain for more than a few years. However, it has attracted a lot of attention not only from academicians, commentators, and political pundits because of its extremely significant geostrategic location and minerals laden plateau, but all the regional powers have taken great interest in its geostrategic significance. This article is an effort to re-comprehend the issue of Baluchistan because of its rejuvenated significance owing to China's One Belt One Road Initiative as it provides a gateway to China through Gawadar Port to the rest of the world. Besides extensive literature review, document analysis, in-depth interviews with the relevant stakeholder in Baluchistan were conducted to construct the meaning of the socio-political developments in the province.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Baluchistan is the largest province of Pakistan in terms of area though on the contrary it is the smallest one in terms of population. Inhabitants of Baluchistan are predominantly Baluch, though Pashtun and people of other ethnic groups also live there. The two most prominent aspects of Baluchistan that shape its geo-strategic significance are its location and mineral rich crust. Since British times, it has been a blood bath region where besides East India Company's battles against tribal lords, Crown also fought cold & hot wars in connection with Great Game that ultimately ended in the division of historically united Baluchistan area into three different regions given under the suzerainty of British India, Iran and Afghanistan (Akhtar, 2011).

The contemporary Baluchistan issue is related with the division of British India and Baluchistan accession to Pakistan. In the last seventy-four years Baluchistan issue has

gone through different phases of mainstreaming, calmness, peaceful protests and violent conflict. It seems to have gone through a metamorphosis where it stands today between mainstreaming and discontentment (Muzaffar et al., 2018).

Owing to its unique geo-strategic location, it has always attracted the power-mongers, traders and preachers particularly from West and Central Asia. Russia, China, India, CARs and all the regional states recognize its significance as a doorway to hot waters. United States obviously remains sensitive for protection of its interest in the region vis-à-vis China and Russia. This reflects the significance of Baluchistan in the regional politics because of its character to enable connectivity in the region, provide access to warm waters and of course its own mineral laded land (Iqbal, 2012).

This article is an effort to re-comprehend Baluchistan issue in the light of transformed ground realities in order to unveil its genuine novel character. Post-positivist approach guided this research. Besides, a thorough literature review, examination of different reports, in-depth interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders in different cities of Baluchistan.

## **2. BALUCHISTAN: AN INTRODUCTION**

### ***2.1: BALUCHISTAN & ITS GEO-STRATEGIC LOCATION***

Baluchistan is situated at the south eastern tip of Iranian plateau. Baluchistan borders two states Afghanistan in north and Iran in west. In the northwest lie the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) in the northwest. It is connected with the provinces of Sind, Punjab and KPK in the east. It is spanned over an area of 131855 square miles. It is a hilly terrain but also has some very fertile valleys and plains. The Koh-e-Safed range in Baluchistan connects it with parts of Iran (Bakht, 2008).

Baluchistan has a unique landscape in the entire region. It provides the shortest and relatively easy route to hot waters of the Arabian Sea. This is one of the reason due to which global and regional powers take interest in its issues for maximizing their own interests (Shah, 2017). Baluchistan serves the role of an internal and external gateway. It not only facilitates regional countries by providing access to sea but it also connects the three other provinces of Pakistan together. It always plays significant role in the politics within the state and in the region as well (Jabeen et al., 2012).

Its geo-strategic significance further multiplies because of its energy reserves, and mineral reserves that include gold, uranium, and copper reserves. Similarly, Baluchistan coastline is situated opposite to the channel of Hormuz which facilitate worldwide oil supply. Baluchistan coast can facilitate a rich economic zone for Pakistan. Its abundant natural resources scattered over thousands (180,000) of square kilometer given Baluchistan a unique position among other provinces of Pakistan. Though, it is an underdeveloped province however keeping in view its geographical significance, mineral rich terrain and coastal line it is contended that once political issues surrounding it are resolved it will surely lead the state in economic growth.

### ***2.2: BALUCISTAN & ITS PEOPLE***

Ethnically Baluchistan is composed of three major tribes namely Baluch, Pashtun, Brahui, along with some other smaller ethnic communities. However, Baluch and Pashtun are the two major ethnic groups in the society of Baluchistan. Historically, the Baluch people lived in a much wider area adjacent to current Baluchistan in Afghanistan and Iran.

### **2.3: BIRTH OF BALUCHISTAN ISSUE: MAJOR DYNAMICS**

In 1839, British forces on the return from Afghanistan sacked Khan of Kalat and started dismembering the united Baluchistan. Having an influential hand in state affairs, parts of Baluchistan were given to Shah Shuja of Kabul and parts to rulers of Sind (Haider, 2007). In order to check Russia on one hand, and for the security of Punjab and Sind from Baloch rebels, gradually Khanate of Kalat gained significance in the British Empire. The resolution of border disputes between British India, Iran and Afghanistan through different agreements particularly Durand line agreement in 1893 between British rulers and the Afghanistan Ameer Abdur Rehman resulted in vivisection of Baluch and Pashtun tribes on either side of the border. Baluch tribes in particular got distributed in three states i.e. Iran, Afghanistan and British India because of the new demarcation. It was never acceptable to the tribal Baluchs and hence a severe gulf between the British rulers and Baluch came into being (Majeed, 2015).

The contemporary Baluchistan issue have its origin in Partition of British India. Partition marked another significant historical point in the life of Baluch history. As the already existing rift got a new shape at this juncture of history. Some of the major dynamics of the issues are highlighted below.

#### **2.3.1: Disputed Accession**

Baluchistan accession to Pakistan has been made disputed which provided basis for Baluchistan issue. A deep look suggests that there was no consensus between the brothers who were traditional and legal heir to the Khanate of Kalat. Having been given the right to choose whether to join either of Pakistan or India or remain independent Khan of Kalat on August 15, 1947 decided to be independent, however six months later on March 27, 1948 he proclaimed to join Pakistan. Khan's younger brother, Shahzada Abdul Karim Khan did not accept this proclamation and rejected this accession. He revolted against the government of Pakistan and left for Afghanistan. He launched armed movement against Pakistan and encountered Pakistan military. He was eventually captured in 1958 and was sent to imprisonment for seven years. For many this was the starting point of Baluchistan dispute.

#### **2.3.2: Sardari System**

Predominantly, Baluchistan is a tribal society in which *sardars* enjoy a very esteemed and powerful position to the extent of being worshipped. They make almost all the decisions about the lives and deaths of their tribal subjects. It cannot be imagined that a tribesmen can vote on his own will against the wish of his *Sardar* (Jabeen et al., 2012). British colonial masters in order to safeguard their own interest reorganized the *sardari* or *nawab* system on newlines to control these power mongers and use them for exploitation of politically disabled public (Mirza, 2013). Some argue that socio-economic modernization of the province is against the survival of sardars. Common people are condemned to lead their lives according to the wishes of the *Sardars* (Majeed, 2015). A complete submission to writ of the state of Pakistan was nothing but a suicide for their political power, therefore for the survival of their own power issues like Baluchistan was mandatory.

#### **2.3.3: Foreign Intervention**

Baluchistan acquires unprecedented significance due to its geo-strategic location in the region. As being the gateway to Arabian Sea, it has been eyed by many regional and global powers including India, US, Russia, Iran the Central Asian Republics (CARs) and

Afghanistan (Noraiee). History shows that these states at various junctures of time have strived to maximize their interests in the region by directly or indirectly meddling affairs of Baluchistan (Muzaffar et al., 2018). (China being the latest in this struggle that seems to have realized that this opportunity can only be availed only through shared benefits coupled with peaceful mechanisms.

Baluchistan seems to have become the home of many intelligence agencies. As government of Pakistan have repeatedly blamed RAW and Mosad explicitly to support nationalists, separatists even sectarian groups to destabilize Baluchistan and Pakistan (Abid & Ashfaq, 2016). At times the Indian leadership of Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary level have acknowledged Indian interference in Pakistan affairs and particularly its role in the dismemberment of Pakistan and creation of Bangladesh in 1971. The role that Prime Minister Narendra Modi cherished to accept during his state visit to Bangladesh in 2015. The arrest and subsequent trial of Kalboshun Yadiv, an Indian Navy Officer is an open fact. Similarly, many analysts look at US and Russia with suspicion and they believe that their role is not only limited in destabilizing Baluchistan by patronizing Greater Baluchistan Movement but they are also involved in Sindhu Desh and Pakhtonistan movement. Similar are Pakistani concerns about Iran.

### **3. DISSECTING THE BALUCHISTAN ISSUE**

A deep look suggests that Baluch animosity started even before the creation of Pakistan when the Durand Line agreement was made on the pattern of border agreements in Africa by the colonial masters confirming the fact that Baluch people could not be reunited as they had been for centuries across Afghanistan, Iran and Mughal India. Such border commissions/awards intentionally divided the tribes and they were forced to settle in more than one state as a policy to divide their power in order to keep them under control. There is enough evidence to support the fact that people of Quetta and many other cities of Baluchistan took part in Pakistan movement which shows that by the time Pakistan came into being many of the Baluch tribes have permanently settled on either side of Durand Line and they were divided on the issue of joining Pakistan or remaining independent. Shahi Jirga was a legitimate instrument to decide on this issue which favored to join Pakistan, though Baluch tribes living on the other side of the Durand Line under the leadership of Shahzada Karim Khan opposed this decision and who exiled to Afghanistan in 1948 and organized a militia (Sultana, 2019).

The newly created state of Pakistan faced several challenges since its creation. Some of the worst were lack of political awareness, mal administration coupled with corruption that badly affected the marginalized groups in the state. Either it be smaller provinces, ethnic groups, religious minorities, poor sections of society all had to suffer at the hands of dominant political parties, religious parties, bureaucracy and rich elites in the society. Baluch and Baluchistan were no exception to this trend (Akhtar, 2011).

Power abuse at the hands of political and military elites is the hallmark of Baluchistan tragedy in post partition era. The modern rebellious Baluch psyche is nothing but response to lethal and consistent exploitation by the elite groups that condemned the province in the debris of poverty, lawlessness and a sense of deprivation which is providing the fertile environment for rebellious movements. This is reflected in the demands for self-rule, control over economy and proprietorship of resources by many Baluch political parties and pressure groups (Grare, 2006).

Besides political negligence and poor federal policies towards Baluchistan, military operations badly affected the spirit of common Baluch people and indirectly promoted the anti-federation sentiments in the province and pockets of supports for Baluch (Khetran, 2019). Whatever be the imbedded dynamics and causes behind the Baluch insurgency, the related events and manifestations of Baluchistan history of the last 74 years point to the fact that there are two different dimensions of the Baluchistan conflict. The same have been verified by interviews of the relevant stakeholders. Baluchistan issue is influenced by two mindsets that motivate Baluch politics; modest Baluch demand for self-government and self-respect and the others are Nationalist Baloch who promote anti-state feelings and encourage the expression of “Azad Baluchistan” (Muzaffar et al., 2018).

### **3.1 DIMENSION OF BALUCHISTAN CRISIS**

If one examines the Baluchistan situation minutely it becomes obvious that Baluchistan issue is multivariate in nature. Many portray it as an insurgency, while others’ highlight the ethnic and sectarian sides of the issue. In a similar terrain many expound on the poverty, lawlessness, and many other issues in the province. A deep look suggests that Baluchistan issue has two major dimensions to it; there is a struggle for basic rights and there is a movement for free Baluchistan.

#### **(A) STRUGGLE FOR BASIC RIGHTS**

##### ***1. Famines, Poverty & Proprietorship of resources***

Abundance of natural resources makes Baluchistan the richest province of Pakistan, however, it’s per capital income is lowest among the provinces in Pakistan. A very large proportion of Baluchistan land, almost 90 percent is barren due shortage of irrigation system, consequently famine and economic problems are unavoidable. Being the largest province in terms of area covering almost 43 percent of the state of Pakistan is mostly dry facing acute water scarcity (Iqbal, 2012).

Probably the most pressing rift between the province and center has revolved around the distribution of resources and the revenues collected from natural reserves of Baluchistan. Disputes over oil exploration and gas reserves have persisted since Baluchistan accession to Pakistan. Government strives to attract foreign companies for oil exploration, but these companies directly or indirectly expose Baluch’s concerns to rest of the world, thus these also become part of the problem as they have to protect their interests (Haris, 2020).

CPEC is opening new avenues for infrastructural and human resource development in Baluchistan particularly through its focus on Gwadar Port. It is expected that the project will bring economic prosperity for Baluch people by creating hundreds of jobs and a conducive channel for international trade as well. However, it is apprehended that the problem will continue to persist as majorities of Baluch population are uneducated and unskilled (CPEC News and Research, 2019).

##### ***2. Pakistan Government Policies towards Baluchistan***

It’s an irony to note that government of Pakistan could not comprehend the dynamics of politics in Baluchistan and created rifts and unrest through its own policies. Utter consistent negligence and resolving issues through sensitive means always deepened the roots of distrust and widened the gulf between center and the province. In order to achieve political purposes ethnic and sectarian groups in the province have been repeatedly exploited. This led to popularity of tribal *sardars* and strengthening of tribal system. Deliverance to the commons was never the ultimate aim of central policies that de-

popularized the center and Baluch public got disillusioned from the myth of independence from the British. Politics in Baluchistan is determined by pressure groups, small political parties and tribal leaders' alliances whose focus remains their own interest and slogans against center are used as stick for getting the appropriate carrots. Eighteenth amendment could not bring the desired results because political parties and party system in Baluchistan is still passing through rudimentary stages (Mirza, 2013).

### ***3. Provisional Autonomy***

Since independence provincial autonomy has been the demand of smaller provinces in Pakistan. This issue has served as a rift between center and province (Ziring, 1980). Self-rule has been one of the fundamental demands of Baluch people (Iqbal, 2012). The provinces wanted to have control on most of the departments with autonomy from the center. Police, education, health and many other fundamental ministries remained under the control of federal government that created a rift between Baluchistan government and Federal government as provincial government was unable to satisfy its people. Nevertheless, this issue eventually got resolved through 18th amendment which at least legally and theoretically accorded autonomy to provinces on most of the subjects. Nonetheless, this is still far from reality in practice as the federal governments since passing of 18th amendment continued to meddle in the affairs of Baluchistan by different means. Forgetful of Pakistan People's Party government of Z.A.Bhutto's in 1970s, two of the parties i.e. PML(N) and PTI that formed government in the center played decisive role in the formation of provincial governments in Baluchistan and its issues thereafter (Akhtar, 2011).

### ***4. Ethnic Dimension of the conflict***

There is a widespread perception in ethnic minorities in Pakistan that Pakistan is being run by Punjabi majority. This feeling is ethnic deprivation is acute in Baluchistan. As a result, one often hears the reports of citizens from Punjab province being abducted, killed or tortured in Baluchistan (Akhtar, 2011). These sentiments reflect nothing but a sense of inferiority that has been rooted in the hearts of Baluch people because of unjust policies of the Punjab dominated federal governments for years.

Great Game and decolonization added to the complexity of ethnic dimension of Baluchistan. Pakistani Baluchistan is the root of Baluch as an ethnic group in this region while its offshoots are in Afghanistan and Iran (Rehman,2014). This further paves the way for external non-state actors' involvement into Pakistan.

### ***5. Human Rights violations & Missing persons dispute***

Issue of missing person from Baluchistan is yet another complicated issue related to Baluchistan crisis. Relatives of the missing person generally only demand the whereabouts of their loved ones and the freedom for Baluchistan. Human rights organizations have been consistently raising over missing persons in Pakistan. The highest number of missing persons belong to Baluchistan. Analysts assume that these missing persons are either suspected Baluch nationalists or these are extremists desired by U.S. who have been shipped to U.S. cells somewhere in the world. Issue of missing persons have rallied support in many social strata's in the society as a manifestation of the challenges to freedom of thought and expression in Pakistan (Javaid & Jahangir, 2015).

Dead bodies are found in lonely places, tortures cases are reported from time to time (Noormal, 2018). General Pervaiz Musharraf, ex-president and chief of army staff of Pakistan in his memoirs confirms the arrest of 689 Baluch insurgents in 2006. He further acknowledged that 369 out of the total were handed over to U.S. and in return financial rewards were granted (Ali & Ansari, 2014).

## **(B) MOVEMENT FOR FREE BALUCHISTAN**

The other dimension of the crisis characterizes it as a movement for the liberation of Baluchistan. Many of the historical incidents that tend towards this aspect have been discussed below.

### ***1. Insurgence & its phases***

Several cycles of insurgence have been witnessed in Baluchistan. The first Baluch rebellion was witnessed in 1948 when brother of Khan of Kalate, Abdul Karim Khan rejected the Baluchistan accession to Pakistan and launched militant movement. However, he was arrested and sent to prison for seven years. Short and moderate spans of uprisings had been seen in 1958-59, 1962-68, 1973-77 and 2002. These uprisings invited military operations almost every time resulting in loss of lives, property and the death of political development process (Akhtar, 2011).

### ***2. Military operations***

It is ironical to note that military option has been used by Pakistan extravagantly in the case of Baluchistan. Socio-economic development and alignment with the leaders who only demanded self-rule was not encouraged. Resultantly, in Baluchistan it is a common perception that powers do not lie in the center rather it lies in army headquarters and they feel besieged by the establishment of garrisons in Baluchistan. Military solution seems to be the only solution with federal government (Mahsood & Miankhel, 2013).

History shows that influence of military has remained dominant in Pakistan and so seems to be the history of this issue. All the issues can-not be resolved by military power. Incident of hitting Pervaiz Musharraf convoy in 2006 was responded by a full-scale military operation in Baluchistan that resulted in the killing of prominent Baluch leader, an ex-governor of the province along with many others. It is such incidents that promote rift between center and the province (Ali & Ansari, 2014). One may say these military operations further aggravated the issue and changed its dimension from the struggle for basic rights to movement for free Baluchistan.

### ***3. Killing of Baluch leaders***

In a similar terrain it is argued that the killing of tribal *sardars* in a tribal society will naturally invite violent reactions. In a highly conservative society like Baluchistan, this was not a wise strategy to suppress tribal *sardars* to the point of extermination. As obvious 'loyalty' to 'sardar' is a cherished trait in such tribal societies that ultimately lead to violent response. The killing of Baluch leaders right from Meer Bukh in 1958, Nawabzada Baloch Marri, leader of the expelled Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA), Sher Muhammad Baloch (Chairman Baloch Republican Party), Ghulam Muhammad Baloch (Chairman of Baloch National Movement) and Lala Munir Baloch (General Secretary of Baloch National Front) to Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, ex-Chief Minister and ex-Governor of Baluchistan in 2006 were such unacceptable policies of Pakistan government that further agitated the grave situation in Baluchistan. These incidents reflect such aspect of the issue that make it a movement for free Baluchistan.

#### ***4. Baluchistan issue and Regional Politics***

Adding fuel to fire is the regional politics of this area. It is undeniable truth that geo-strategic significance of Baluchistan is paramount and power brokers in the region remain vigilant to the opportunity of meddling into the internal matters of Pakistan for their personal interests. This is equally true of Baluchistan where hostile neighbors of Pakistan like India, Afghanistan, Iran and Russia have been found to have relations with insurgent leaders in Baluchistan. In the recent times, USA is equally interested in Baluchistan in order to challenge Chinese One Belt One Road Initiative in the region. Pakistan have blamed many of these states particularly India for patronizing Baluch insurgents. Similarly, China is interested in a peaceful Baluchistan for successful implementation of CPEC projects.

### **Conclusions**

The above analysis refers to different aspects of Baluchistan issue. Keeping in view the historical developments, interviews of the relevant stakeholders, examination of biographies and documents following conclusion can be drawn.

1. Baluchistan issue is a semi-ethno-national conflict, despite having tenants or traces of nationalism. It could never flourish into a fully nationalist movement for independence. At the time of decolonization, because of its religious and cultural similarity and connectivity with rest of the areas it was included in Pakistan. It predominantly surfaced as an issue of integration and mainstreaming. There have been pockets in Baluchistan where nationalists enjoy support however, they could not garner province wide popularity. Hence, it is not appropriate to label it as a full-scale insurgency that could sustain more than few years. Therefore, it has been argued as a failed insurgency. It is more like an issue of identity confirmation and mainstreaming into national lines, having roots in mismanagement, wrong doings and miscalculated policies of otherwise Punjabi dominated governments of different political parties in the center.
2. The history shows that shorter waves of violence sprout in reaction to different policies of central government or any other incident, however, these waves ebbed away gradually in few years and no wave could sustain for a longer period of time. In a similar terrain, coupled with the resolution of the issue of provincial autonomy because of the passing of 18th amendment, the issue of Baluchistan seems to have undergone metamorphosis where it now has remained a struggle for basic rights alone.
3. Nothing but extreme neglect, blunders, autocratic cum authoritarian approaches towards its resolution further aggravated the issue into its current chronic form. Instead, participative, pluralist approaches would have surely guided the situation far quickly towards its resolution.
4. Federal policies that have been consistently blamed to be exploitative prompt perceptions that center is usurping the provincial resources. These particular relate to policies regarding oil and gas exploration, Sandak gold reserves, aluminum, and copper reserves.
5. It is without doubt that Baluchistan occupies a significant geo-strategic position that lure many external powers to maximize their own interests. So, from a realist perspective implicit or explicit role of foreign actors cannot be dismissed. Even if US, Iran, Central Asian Republics intervention may be the result of exaggeration or conspiracy theory, however, Indian involvement can logically be comprehended. Moreover, there exists

ample evidence regarding Indian intervention in Pakistan internal affairs as have been unearthed in the shape of arrests of Indian spies, evidence of use of Indian munition in different incidents, tracking of calls, etc.

6. It is worth mentioning to note that China will play its role in establishing peace in Baluchistan as a partner of mega project with Pakistan as well as a regional power trying to preserve its interests.

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