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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Pakistan and Baluch Irredentism: Dialogue Needed to Stem the Slide**

By Sajjad Ashraf

### **Synopsis**

*Pakistan faces another nationalist uprising in Baluchistan, driven by grievances over sharing of the proceeds from its resources. Effective governance and a credible dialogue with Baluch leaders are required to stem further polarisation.*

### **Commentary**

PAKISTAN IS once again facing calls for independence from Baluch nationalists in its largest province, Baluchistan, which is undergoing another spell of violence. Fiercely tribal and nationalist, the Baluch people, like those of other smaller provinces in Pakistan, resent the Punjabi-dominated state structure and have expressed their reaction with repeated armed movements in support of calls for greater autonomy or complete independence. The Pakistani government's response has been typically to blame a foreign power (meaning India) or the sardars (tribal chiefs) for the uprising.

Besides calls for independence the Baluch demand control over resources. While nationalism may drive Baluch yearning for self-rule, complaints about inadequate compensation for resources extracted from the province are central to their grievances against Islamabad. For instance Baluchistan gets only two percent of the profit from its major copper mines. The natural gas drawn from Sui since 1954, which has driven the Pakistan economy, was only provided to users in Baluchistan in the 1980s.

### **Strategic location**

While much of the province remains undeveloped the new Gwadar town development, adjacent to the port, has turned into a land grab for outsiders who want to make it a high-end resort. Further, the development of two new cantonments in Baluchistan have angered locals. The killing and callous disposal of the body of Nawab Akbar Bugti, a Baluch leader resisting military intrusion, has fanned the unrest in Baluchistan. The rallying cry for Baluch now is to remove the cantonments and bring former President and Army Chief General Musharraf to trial for the killing of Bugti.

Baluchistan, constituting 43 percent of Pakistan but with just 4% of the population, is strategically located, providing the shortest land link to Afghanistan and to western China. It has 700 kilometres of Arabian Sea coastline and is mineral-rich with potentially some of the biggest mines of gold and copper besides natural gas. Baluchistan is the logical route for the Iran-Pakistan-India energy corridor. Allegedly the home of 'Quetta Shura'

– the consultative body of Afghan resistance - its sparse population makes it vulnerable to external intrusions.

Internally Baluchistan suffers from poor governance. The 18th constitutional amendment, giving provinces greater control over economic resources has led to more corruption in Baluchistan where the entire 65-member provincial assembly comprises the front bench. The chief minister is not known for his leadership. The recent government offer of holding an all-party conference (APC) on Baluchistan has no takers.

Of serious concern is the question of missing persons in Baluchistan. Though reliable numbers are not available they are said to range from less than a hundred to thousands. Bodies of many missing have been found bearing torture marks. Politicians and civil society blame it on the secret services.

### **Pakistan's dilemma**

Pakistan, born out of a partition of India in 1947 from which Bangladesh spun out after a bitter civil war in 1971, faces a serious dilemma. Both divisions occurred on the basis of demands for justice and fairness. Both were resisted in the beginning and yet came about with millions of lives lost. Justice and fairness are at the centre of Baluch demands.

Baluch nationalist leaders know that a thinly populated large land mass where the Baluch constitute just about half the population works against their demand for complete independence. Equally valorous Pashtuns, who constitute much of the other half, are well integrated into the Pakistani state system and will challenge the Baluch demand. Contiguity to other provinces and divided population, make it easier for the military to quell the insurgency. Moreover, unlike Indian military support for Bengali uprising in 1971, Pakistan will not face a hostile neighbour in Iran that will provide succour to the insurgency.

Against this backdrop, demand for independence seems only a tool used by the Baluch nationalists to extract maximum concessions. There seems total agreement in the rest of Pakistan that force is no solution to the problems and Baluch grievances need to be addressed.

A corruption-free and effective provincial government, working in the interest of people, needs to reclaim space from the military and establish order necessary for resumption of economic activity in the province. Pakistan's leadership must initiate a credible dialogue quickly before polarisation due to an election year begins to infect the country - as it did in 1971.

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