[**Balochistan misunderstood**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1741590/balochistan-misunderstood)

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“YOU mean they actually read books in Balochistan?” My Lahori friend sounded sceptical. For him, as for most Pakistanis, Balochistan is a war zone where people want guns not books. But, just back from the 2023 Gwadar Book Festival, I told him he was not only wrong but as wrong as wrong could be. Young Baloch are thirsty to know; they buy nearly three times more books than sold at literary festivals in Karachi, Lahore, or Islamabad.

More importantly, this festival — and others I have attended in Balochistan — was organic, energetic and unfettered. Thankfully, I neither saw nor heard support for BLA/BLF terrorists. With a shoestring budget, staffed by young volunteers, and held inside a rundown high-school compound, the GBF was unlike the tepid, uninspiring Karachi-Lahore type of lit-fests. Held in five-star hotels with abundant corporate and embassy funding, these are feel-good events with lots of self-congratulations, but topics and speakers deemed controversial are carefully excluded.

My friend was pleasantly surprised to learn that more female students than male students asked questions after my Gwadar University lecture. I had long complained to him that, over the past 35-40 years, female students at my old university in Islamabad have taken up the veil and turned into passive listeners, rarely summoning the courage to stand up and ask.

But if my well-read, well-travelled, and well-meaning friend was so consistently wrong, what’s going on in other minds? When news is blacked out, good news and bad news both stop. For fear of weakening CPEC, authorities are hypersensitive about negative news. Except for that cleared from ‘above’, print and TV media may not touch Balochistan on anything.

Designers of the Gwadar CPEC project had only roads and the port in mind, not Gwadaris’ welfare.

None has underscored this sad fact more brilliantly than a fisherman’s son, Maulana Hidayat-ur-Rahman of Gwadar’s Haq Do Tehreek. At last year’s Asma Jehangir Conference in Lahore, he stole the show. When a mouse found its way into a halwai’s shop in Lahore, he thundered, Pakistani media was set ablaze. But when dead bodies appear by roadsides in Balochistan, none dare whisper. The redoubtable maulana, also a Jamaat-i-Islami leader, is currently under arrest and charged with murder. People say he is at the centre of a tussle between two agencies, one of which wants him in, the other out.

As an outsider to Gwadar (last visit circa 1960) I could not figure out which of a multiplicity of security organisations has the top charge. Each protects its own turf and probably has its own extra-salary income sources. Along all highways and major roads, hilltops bristle with Omani-style forts and fortifications. Bunkers and check posts are everywhere.

Passing through the dry-as-dust town of Turbat, I wondered what made the local economy tick. Answer: smuggling. No attempt — not even the flimsiest — is made to hide the free flow of petrol, oil and LNG from across the Iranian border. On their way to Karachi and parts of Punjab, pickup trucks loaded with fuel-filled jerry cans are the largest fraction of road traffic. Luxury coaches to Karachi, I was told, have a tank under the chassis containing eight to ten thousand litres. Pre-assigned cuts warm pockets along the way.

One fact — more than any other — strikes a visitor instantly. The men who designed New Gwadar wasted not a moment in worrying about Gwadaris, the original inhabitants. Pushed away from the harbour, areas permitted for their fishing keep shrinking. A proposed new road will devastate the local boat construction industry. The old town looks like a dump, but Rawalpindi doesn’t care.

Those building the port — the Chinese — are invisible. Locals humorously call them yajooj-majooj. Instead of romping around the incredibly beautiful beaches, they live inside that which from afar looks like a prison camp. Once the project is over, I am sure they will be anxious to get back home and savour freedom.

A near-accidental visit to the Gwadar Institute of Technology turned out to be a surreal experience. A plaque says this super-modern institution was handed over by China in 2021. The auditoriums, lecture halls, classrooms, and laboratories are picture perfect. I counted over 60 training simulators for cranes, gantries, heavy vehicles and forklifts. Later, upon googling, the per-piece price ranged from $30,000-$50,000. All are spanking new, still under plastic covers. On this vast but desolate campus there are no teachers, students, or staff — only chowkidars. No one has a clue of how to get things moving.

This is development gone mad. But who is to blame and who will foot the bill? Was there a PC-1 planning document, and what’s in it? Still, Gwadar’s development will doubtless benefit those who have always won. Vast areas have been cordoned off with razor wire for various official organisations and their housing schemes. Colonisation, of course, is too strong a word to use here. Let’s just say it’s the familiar desire for officer colonies.

An unexpected encounter between Quetta and Gwadar led to a three-hour conversation with a junior army officer, a Kakul graduate. Brilliant and likeable, he engaged the TTP in firefights in South Waziristan. Well, how do they compare against BLF/BLA? He laughed: these are criminals and adventurists. But TTP are formidable hardcore terrorists. He then paused: he’d rather fight elsewhere where he would be liked by people, not here.

Intriguing! This begged my question — why don’t you people just go back home? Leave law-and-order to the local police and Baloch Levies? He sighed. Yes, this should happen sooner rather than later. But both are under-equipped, under-trained and, being locals, have families that terrorists can target. This young officer doesn’t want to be seen as part of an occupation force. Though troubled, he still loves the army.

Those at the centre of power imagine Balochistan as some faraway, barren land of tribals. Far too rich to be left alone, they think it must be governed from afar. Stunted development springing from this regressive mindset is driving Pakistan back onto the rocks. Balochistan — and for that matter the concept of Pakistan — will have to be re-understood in very new ways. Else history will exact its awful toll as it did once. But next time around, the price could be still steeper.

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