**[Insurgency and social change](https://www.dawn.com/news/1832982/insurgency-and-social-change)**

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THE recent [killing](https://www.dawn.com/news/1832433) of seven barbershop workers from Punjab in Gwadar is another indicator that the insurgency in Balochistan is evolving and intensifying demographic changes, which will impact the sociopolitical landscape of the province.

Although targeted killings of settlers in Balochistan are not a new trend, the emergence of the Balochistan Liberation Army as the primary insurgent group has significantly increased operational capacities and diversified targets.

While the BLA has not officially claimed responsibility for the Gwadar attack, it is likely the act of one of its wings or affiliate groups. Last month, the group carried out a significant attack, [killing nine people](https://www.dawn.com/news/1827193) from central Punjab who were planning on reaching Europe through Iran. Based on their ethnicity, BLA gunmen abducted them from a bus bound for Taftan and later dumped their bodies under a bridge in a hilly area of Noshki.

In a similar attack, possibly by the same gunmen, two people were killed when they tried to escape the assailants’ cordon on N-40, the Quetta-Noshki highway. Following the Noshki attack, the BLA issued a statement claiming that its special squad had killed ‘agents’ of Pakistan’s intelligence agencies who, they claimed, were travelling in plain clothes on the bus. However, media reports and investigations later revealed that the victims were using the Balochistan route to travel to Iran and onward to Europe.

Baloch militants view workers and travellers from Punjab as collaborators or agents of security forces or the federal government. Attacks targeting Punjabi workers and settlers have occurred in various parts of the province in the past.

It appears that the insurgents kill settlers because they are non-combatants and, as such, easy targets. Militant groups assign such tasks to their new recruits to test their conviction and draw them into the cycle of violence. While one can comprehend Baloch grievances against the state institutions and Punjab, it is also crucial to understand why they target non-combatants who have been serving them for years.

Whenever anger flares against the state’s flawed policies, settlers become the targets.

Traditionally, Baloch society has a few key professions. Hairdressing is one of the major ones they miss. Teaching comes next, with teachers from Punjab and the Urdu-speaking community making significant contributions to the education sector in the province. Like tribal codes in other parts of the country, the Baloch follow the tradition of hosting members of different ethnicities without integrating them into their tribal ethics. This is a common practice, as assimilation is a long process. The same applies to settlers from Punjab and urban Sindh, who have embraced the norms of Baloch society, while maintaining ties with their native towns and communities.

However, Punjabis constitute the largest ethnic group in the country and wield significant power and resources, leading to resentment not only among the Baloch, but also Pakhtuns and Sindhis. Whenever anger flares against the establishment and the state’s flawed policies, settlers become the targets of this animosity. Historically, barbers have been the first victims when such hatred triggers violence. It is worth noting that many of these barbers hail from southern Punjab, much of which identifies itself as Baloch, but their official domicile determines their identity and ethnicity.

Over the last two decades, Pakhtuns have captured market businesses in urban Balochistan, while Sindhis have gradually become prominent in the labour market. Despite issues of ethnic and tribal pride and sociocultural differences, there has been no hostility towards these communities. This is because both ethnicities are part of Balochistan and share some cultural commonalities.

Moreover, both communities have faced major hostility, apart from minor issues related to ethnic and tribal pride and sociocultural differences. The reasons are that both ethnicities are part of Balochistan and share few other cultural commonalities, but both are also seen as deprived communities and, in the past, have remained part of the political struggle for rights.

Insurgencies have no room for neutrality or ambiguity, as insurgents seek clear distinctions between friends and foes. In places like [Myanmar](https://www.dawn.com/news/1789141) and [India](https://www.dawn.com/news/1827824), ethnic insurgents target civilians from minority ethnic groups, as well as engage in property destruction and other abuses. While small ethnic groups may strive to maintain a neutral stance, they often find themselves between insurgents and counterinsurgents in grey areas. This dynamic is evident among Pakhtuns and Sindhis, who have been targeted by insurgents while working on government projects. The contractors had hired them as an alternative to Punjabi labour, but they were not spared despite a sense of affinity with them.

Sociopolitical transformation is a complex phenomenon, which is influenced not only by insurgents but also by internal societal changes. Baloch society is transforming due to rural-to-urban migration, increasing literacy rates, and improved connectivity. Similar to Karachi’s experience, urbanisation in Quetta is making other major urban centres multi-ethnic too.

Despite ethnic bonds with Sindhis, coexistence with Pakhtuns and Sindhis may face occasional challenges. Additionally, religion presents a growing challenge, as religious fervour increases alongside literacy rates among the Baloch. While this may appear advantageous for state institutions seeking cohesion through religion, religiosity has not weakened Balochistan’s nationalistic sentiments.

The promotion of religious organisations and [madressahs](https://www.dawn.com/news/1784406) by state institutions has failed to make a significant impact, mainly due to the vast disparities within Baloch society’s tribal, rural, and urban composition, which foster diverse political interests. The very forces undermining peace are now major power players.

At the national level, the province’s poor human development and governance indicators leave ample space for resistance politics. Sociopolitical changes often trigger paradoxical sentiments, with simultaneous pro-development and anti-development attitudes emerging.

When the sense of deprivation intensifies, and resource distribution becomes contentious, it creates a conducive environment for militants to recruit, expand, and diversify their targets and tactics. Targeting non-combatants of the majority group reflects a deepening societal anger at this level. This is the most crucial level, as the state has to rethink and correct its approach towards Balochistan.

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