

Enemies of development

Opposition to 'development' is not limited to tribal Balochistan. People have died resisting bulldozers right here in Islamabad

Zaigham Khan



On the face of it, opposition to any development activity appears anachronistic and illogical. What kind of people would

oppose construction of modern cities to replace stone-age villages, new dams and canals to turn wasteland into green fields, ports in place of fishing hamlets and even new garrisons to guard them against external threats? Yet people are rising in rebellion against development projects all over the country, some peacefully, and some violently.

A convenient theory is readily available, almost a cliché in Pakistan's urban centres and employed by the establishment to interpret opposition to mega projects. The innocent, illiterate and powerless people in remote areas are mere pawns at the hands of their feudal lords and tribal chiefs who resist development of their fiefdoms because dramatic changes brought by development will erode their traditional authority. This is the main reason for lack of development in Pakistan's rural and tribal areas.

This line of argument simplifies a complex reality to the level of absurdity. It blames the victim and absolves the rulers from their responsibility for social development of the whole country. It also conveniently ignores the fact that a minuscule part of the budget is set aside for development and a good portion of that budget is spent on relatively well-off areas, leaving crumbs and crusts for the least developed regions. This theory suits the establishment and its allied industries, like the land mafia and the engineering lobby, because it does not leave any scope for looking at peoples' grievances and their reasons for opposing mega projects.

Opposition to development activity is surely not limited to tribal Balochistan, where it has reached a form of insurgency. People have died resisting bulldozers right in the shadow of the Margallas where even sniffer dogs wouldn't be able to find a feudal lord. On July 29, 2002, for example, two persons succumbed to police bullets while resisting construction of an elite sector of Islamabad, D-12, on the site of their villages, Sri Saral and Pind Sangrial. The next day, the Interior Minister, Lt-Gen (retired) Moinuddin Haider issued threats to mourning villagers and ordered resumption of the development work within two days in the "larger interest of the allottees".

For the honourable minister it was extraneous to the situation that villagers had been paid compensation, which was 100,000 times less than the market value of the land. With my limited mathematical skills, I calculated that in most cases,

the compensation would be worth just a year's bribe to officials of the Capital Development Authority (CDA) if an evicted villager decided to set up his *jhugi* (hut) near the capital.

CDA was not ready to consider the residents' demand that they should be given residential plots in the sector being built on their lands. The idea of these 'untouchables' living with the 'Brahmins' of Pakistan's only civilian cantonments is an anathema to them. Built on the land stolen from its original inhabitants, no wonder our capital remains under a constant curse.

The site of the under-development Thal Canal is another place I have visited and met project 'beneficiaries'. I found dozens of villagers thrown out of their homes and farms without any compensation or with paltry payments, facing imminent destitution. Their demand for allotting them land in place of cash payment was out rightly rejected

I personally don't know any feudal or tribal chief actively opposing development of his area, though I would not rule out the possibility, since they are the junior partners of our beloved establishment, which in its infinite wisdom has kept us sick and illiterate, only to better safeguard us against our enemies. However, I do know a Baloch chief who went to the extent of challenging the state to demand development for his people.

In 1994, I had reported a rebellion of the Qaisrani tribesmen in Dhodak, near Tausa Sharif in Dera Ghazi Khan. The Qaisranis, who owned the land where Oil and Gas Development Corporation (OGDC) had struck black gold, but found to their horror that the government was only interested in taking their land and water and had no plans for providing any human facilities to them. Since the officials had their four-by-fours and a landing strip had been constructed for the visiting dignitaries, no one felt the need to build a road that could unwittingly provide some convenience to the locals.

The Qaisranis, under the leadership of their chief, Zahoor Khan and his young son, Mir Badshah Khan, laid an armed siege to the facilities to press for

compensation of land and water and to get such basic facilities for the people as schools, hospitals and roads. Had our popular development theory been that true, Dhodak would be very different from Sui, which it surely is not.

The site of the under-development Thal Canal is another place I have visited and met project 'beneficiaries'. I found dozens of villagers thrown out of their homes and farms without any compensation or with paltry payments, facing imminent destitution. Their demand for allotting them land in place of cash payment was out rightly rejected, not because there is no land available in Thal Rakhis, communal lands British had set aside for pastures, have been allotted wholesale to the military and civilian bureaucrats, but cannot be shared with those whose homes happen to lie in the path of the bulldozer.

Complaints from Balochistan are no different in nature, although they have, very naturally, a strong ethnic or nationalistic flavour added to them. So far the only beneficiaries of the Gawadar development are the land mafia, businessmen and non-Baloch elite. For the Baloch, turning into a second rate minority in their own homeland is a doomsday scenario and nothing has been done to assuage their suspicions. Abdul Hayee Baloch, the veteran Baloch politician, told me how he and other Baloch leaders have pleaded for many years to set up technical institutes in Gawadar that could prepare young men and women of the area for the new job opportunities. "When the port becomes operational they will tell us that we are unemployable because we have no relevant skills," he says.

No wonder Baloch are not beating drums and doing *leva* dances to celebrate the new mega project and there are no signs that people will reject their anti-development leaders in a hurry, as has been advised by our brave president, intelligent prime minister and charismatic political leader, Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain. For once, the Baloch sardars are echoing the sentiments of their people and even the most tamed of them all, Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali, is part of the chorus.

Our popular commando president has sprung many a surprise out of his numerous hats. He can write yet another chapter of history by moving gunships to provide cover to masons to build some of the best hospitals and schools of the country in the areas of anti-development sardars in Balochistan. Let me assure him that such an action will reveal to the savages the real intentions of our noble masters, wear them off their misleading sardars and turn them into loyal subjects of our wise establishment.

The writer is an Islamabad based development consultant.
Email: mail@zaigham.com