

# Balochistan — the road

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**The road ahead lies not in confrontation but rapprochement.**

The unrest in some parts of Balochistan is disconcerting and the federal government's decision against a military crackdown in the Sui area has been received with a sigh of relief.

The problems in Balochistan have not erupted overnight. Its main predicament is underdevelopment. Tribes, governed by ferocious chieftains, who have not let development touch their minions lest it dilute their power over their fiefdom, inhabit it. During the first Afghan war, the British army for the first time had marched through Sindh and the inhospitable barren tracks of Balochistan and was confronted by the ferocious Balochi tribes, whose incessant marauding attacks had caused heavy losses. In 1831 Alexander Burnes, a young Captain of Bombay Native Infantry, on the pretext of escorting the royal gift of horses to the Sikh Durbar, carried out a detailed survey. Burnes observed that the Talpur Amirs of Sindh did not maintain a regular army but being of the Baloch race, ruled on the support of numerous Baloch clans. He found the Balochis a particularly savage race but peculiarly brave whose children used swords as toys to play with. Deeply impressed by the raw courage and ferocity of Baloch warriors, the British started their recruitment in the ranks of the Indian Army. The British won the War of Independence of 1857 by using among others the Baloch tribesmen. Having used them effectively during the two World Wars, the British used them as pioneers in setting up the Law Enforcement Forces in Oman, thus the high percentage of Balochis in Oman even today.

Independence made no dent on the plight of the Balochis. However the manipulative machinations of its chieftains is nothing new. Ever since the partition of India became apparent, the rulers of the state of Kalat had been indulging in all kinds of backdoor methods to secure an independent status for themselves. It is alleged that the Khan went to the absurd extent of offering state accession to India, which was politely refused. Despite generous terms offered by the government of Pakistan, the Khan continued to delay the state accession on flimsy pretexts and one of the more ambitious members of the ruling family, Agha Abdul Karim found Pakistan's involvement in Kashmir, as opportune for leading a rebellion in Kalat. He was related to the royal family in Afghanistan and went there in April 1948 to seek assistance and support and raise a lashkar. Though he raised a lashkar of 1500 men and secured support of some 5000 trans-border Afghan tribesmen, he received little sympathy from the Afghan government. On 12 July 1948, Agha Karim and his men surrendered to Pakistan army after a brief skirmish. The swift action by Pakistan army nipped the evil in the bud but the problems in Balochistan and Kalat continued to reappear.

Two years after Bangladesh achieved independence from the Pakistani rule in 1971, Balochistan rose in revolt against the Punjabi-dominated federal government demanding an independent Baloch state. Amongst the leaders of the independence movement were Khair Bux Marri, Sherroo alias Tiger Marri and Ataullah Khan Mengal. The revolt was triggered off by alleged discrimination against the Balochis in matters such as educational facilities, recruitment to the armed forces and other government departments, economic development etc. The regime of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, then in power in Islamabad, crushed the revolt ruthlessly, using the army and the air force. Khair Bux Marri, Tiger Marri and their followers took shelter in Afghanistan. General Ziaul Haq's ascent to power changed the situation. He called off the army operation, dropped the Hyderabad conspiracy case and what is more, sent Ataullah Mengal, a heart patient, to the United Kingdom for medical treatment. All this had a dramatic effect. In no time, the situation returned to normal. All military opera-

tions in Balochistan were ended and troops were withdrawn; a general amnesty was granted to all those who had taken up arms against the government; all sentences were remitted; properties confiscated were returned to their owners. Balochistan never gave any trouble to General Zia and remained peaceful throughout.

The question arises, why the Balochis remained calm for the past thirty years during the regimes of Zia, Benazir and Nawaz Sharif and have now chosen to foment trouble. Specially now when the current regime had drawn up detailed plans for the diversification of the Pakistani economy in order to reduce the present dependence on the export of textiles, leather goods and sports articles and the Karachi port. Its plans for the Gwadar port, the construction of the Makran Coastal Highway connecting Karachi and Balochistan, and the plans for the exploitation of the rich mineral resources of the province are part of this economic diversification project. In its perception, Gwadar would not only become the exit point for the external trade of the Central Asian Republics, Afghanistan and the Xinjiang province of China, but would also reduce the dependence of the Pakistan Navy on Karachi, which is within easy reach of the Indian Navy. Someone has to be blind or have other agendas not to see that the entire strength of the Pakistani state machinery today is geared toward developing Balochistan. This is being done not only to remedy the neglect of the previous Pakistani administrations, but also because our collective strength as a creative and resourceful nation will depend in many ways in this new century on a prosperous and developed Balochistan.

Let us examine some of the apparent causes of grievance of the Balochis:

- » Mounting anger over the denial of the benefits of the natural gas and other mineral resources of the province to the Balochis in the form of increased royalty payments.
- » The denial of any meaningful role to the Balochis in decisions relating to the construction and administration of the Chinese-aided Gwadar port project.
- » The influx of a large number of Punjabis and other non-Balochis into the province to work in the Gwadar project.
- » The continuing acts of discrimination against the Balochis in matters of recruitment to the armed forces and various civilian departments of the government.
- » The establishment of more cantonments in the province to enable the army better maintain law and order.

Apparently the Baloch leaders have managed to exploit the lack of development in Balochistan to shore up their own political standing and even managed to detract the people from the mega projects launched by the current regime at the centre. This has resulted in two kinds of anti-Islamabad and anti-military movements:

An overt political movement in the form of protest meetings, demonstrations and rallies not involving the use of violence. Four non-religious political parties of Balochistan, who have formed a united front, continue to play a leading role in this movement. These are the Jamhoori Watan Party, the National



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Party, the Balochistan National Party (Mengal) and the Baloch Haqtawar.

A covert freedom movement involving targeted acts of violence against economic targets and other infrastructure and military personnel.

The latest spate of violence, which has deepened the crisis erupted when rockets hit the gas purification plant at Sui last week. Triggered off by the alleged rape of a lady doctor at the Sui field hospital.

Despite the provocations of the tribal chiefs like Nawab Akbar Bugti, Sardar Attaullah Khan Mengal and Nawab Khair Bux Marri who are reportedly instigating their tribes to revolt against the Pakistan army, President Pervez Musharraf was ill advised to threaten stern action against the "so-called nationalists and sub-nationalist elements". He said, "Don't push us. This is not the seventies. (This time) they will not even know what has hit them."

The road ahead lies not in confrontation but rapprochement. In making the people of Balochistan realise that more dams, roads, schools and cantonments will mean more jobs, development and prosperity for all.

To bring the Balochis in the centrefold of development, the following steps are recommended:

1. Allay their fear that the seaport at Gwadar, the coastal highway, the airport at Pasni, the Mirani dam and the naval base at Ormara have been designed to benefit the locals more than the centre.

2. Their fear for instance, the displacement which the seaport at Gwadar is expected to cause will move the fishermen of this locality more than 10-15 kms inland affecting their livelihood is unfounded.

3. The contractors must fulfill employment that had been promised Baloch workers.

4. Set up training facilities to train indigenous workers for future recruitment.

5. Give a chance to the local developers in Gwadar's real estate business. They can be helped financially through generous bank loans.

6. Set to rest the Baloch fear that by the influx of people from other provinces, their province will not be swamped by these 'foreigners' and they will be reduced to a minority as has happened in other places.

7. Greater education would sway the people away from the control of the Sardari system. Unfortunately, by dealing directly with the Sardars, it is the Sardars, whose hands are being strengthened.

8. The gas fields at Sui are a sore point. Even today, only six percent of the population of Balochistan has been provided gas. As for the price paid to the province for the gas extracted from Sui, Balochistan feels severely discriminated against. Equitable share must be calculated to satisfy the Balochis.

The government has done well to set up a parliamentary committee and its subcommittees, which have met a number of Baloch leaders and prepared their recommendations. Until the contents of this report are made public, it is difficult to comment on them. But some recommendations have been leaked out. For instance it is reported that the plans to build three military cantonments (at Gwadar, Sui and Kohlu) have been deferred. It is also said that 10,000 jobs will be created in the Frontier constabulary, which will be filled by the locals. The gas royalty rates are to be enhanced substantially while the province will be empowered to sign petroleum exploration and sale deals. It remains to be seen what course the dialogue takes and whether the government in Islamabad will be wise enough to exercise restraint when dealing with the militants. Ultimately it is important that the recommendations made by the committee, especially if they have the backing of the Baloch leaders, are actually implemented and in good faith. They must be able to feel the sense of pride and not deprivation to play their role in the progress of Pakistan.