

From Marginalization to Militancy: Understanding Insurgency in Baluchistan

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Abstract

Baluchistan's historical grievances stem from British rule and the formation of Pakistan, exacerbated by its strategic location and resource wealth. Despite covering a significant portion of Pakistan's landmass, Baluchistan remains politically and economically marginalized. The insurgency, fueled by aspirations for an independent Baluchistan, has persisted for decades, with recent escalations following the American withdrawal from Afghanistan. This study explores the historical context, motivations, and evolving tactics of Baluch militants, highlighting the region's tribal society, poverty, and limited development. As Baluchistan faces renewed challenges, understanding its complexities is crucial for addressing the ongoing insurgency and fostering stability in Pakistan's western border region.

Keywords: Insurgency, terrorism, Afghanistan, Nationalism, BLA, Pakistan Army

Introduction

This study examines the rise of insurgency in Baluchistan, Pakistan's largest province by landmass but least populous. Baluchistan boasts a unique tribal society with clan structures and limited resources due to its mountainous terrain. Historically, Baluchistan maintained a degree of autonomy before British involvement and eventual incorporation into Pakistan in 1947. Baluch nationalists, however, contest the legitimacy of this merger, arguing it was forced upon them.

The resulting sense of marginalization, coupled with poverty and limited opportunities for education and healthcare, has fueled separatist sentiment. This study explores the historical context of the insurgency, the motivations of Baluch militants who seek an independent Baluchistan, and their evolving tactics, particularly in the wake of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The research employs a qualitative approach, drawing on academic publications (papers and books) to analyze the insurgency's roots. Recognizing the limited recent scholarship on the post-withdrawal situation, this study fills this gap by examining the motivations, tactics, and recent activities of Baluch militant groups.

Data collection presented challenges due to the sensitive nature of the topic. However, the research utilizes primary sources from official social media accounts of the Pakistani military's

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public relations arm (ISPR) and those of the insurgent groups themselves. Additionally, the study incorporates journalistic articles from both Pakistani and international sources, along with relevant academic theses for a comprehensive perspective.

Hypothesis

This research proposes a central hypothesis: despite continued armed struggle, Baluch militants are unlikely to achieve their goals through this approach. Furthermore, the post-withdrawal scenario in Afghanistan raises concerns about potential support for the insurgency from Afghan actors.

Literature on the Conflict

The following section provides a comprehensive literature review on the insurgency in Baluchistan, Pakistan.

Early History and Nationalist Sentiment

The concept of an independent Baluch state has roots stretching back to the pre-colonial era. Baluchistan existed as a separate entity from Mughal and British India (Himayat, 2015). The British held certain areas through agreements with Baluch leaders, while other regions fell under Afghan control (Himayat, 2015). The state of Kalat, with its own assembly, aspired for independence during the partition of India (Dunne, 2006). This sentiment clashed with the aspirations of Pashtun nationalists who envisioned an independent Pashtun nation (Dunne, 2006).

The Insurgency and External Influences

The accession of Kalat to Pakistan in 1947 marked the beginning of the armed insurgency (Dushka, 1995). Baluch nationalists viewed this as an act of coercion. The Soviet Union, aligned with supporting socialist movements, provided aid to the Baluch insurgency during the Cold War (Dushka, 1995). This support included arms, training, and ideological guidance.

Socioeconomic Factors and Grievances

The discovery of natural resources in Baluchistan, coupled with its historical marginalization, fueled a sense of insecurity among the Baluch people (Khan, 2021). The region's political and economic underdevelopment, dominated by tribal chiefs, further exacerbated these grievances (Khan, 2021). The Baluch perceive themselves as excluded from the benefits of resource extraction, despite the province's contribution to Pakistan's coffers.

Nature of the Insurgency and its Evolution

The Baluch insurgency differs from Islamist militant groups by being geographically focused on Baluchistan and occasionally neighboring Sindh (Khalid, 2022). The Baluch Liberation Army (BLA) has emerged as the primary insurgent group, uniting various smaller factions (Khalid, 2022). Baluch nationalism and national socialism serve as the ideological underpinnings of the insurgency (Khalid, 2022). The vast area of Baluchistan provides a suitable environment for guerilla warfare (Khalid, 2022).

External Support and Regional Dynamics

Pakistan alleges that India and Israel provide logistical backing to the insurgency (Rehman, 2014). The porous borders with Iran offer potential routes for smuggled supplies (Rehman, 2014). Following the Soviet Union's collapse, Baluch militants reportedly sought support from Western powers (Alamgir, 2012). The post-withdrawal scenario in Afghanistan has raised concerns about potential assistance from the Taliban or other Afghan actors (Ali, 2020).

The Path Forward: Negotiations and Addressing Grievances

The literature emphasizes the need for dialogue and addressing Baluch grievances as a means to achieving lasting peace (Gichki, 2010). Baluch demands for greater autonomy and a fairer share of resource wealth require consideration (Gichki, 2010). A historical analysis of the central government's interference in Baluchistan's political affairs underscores the importance of respecting provincial autonomy (Gichki, 2010).

Rise in Violence and its Causes

Baluch issue is not new, it has just aggravated in different instances. In the early 1970s, Baluchistan saw a major insurgency, this was a time when many of the Baluch democrats picked up the arms and established bunkers. This was a result of a response to the military action in Baluchistan. The insurgents couldn't establish any goals but the Pakistan army took control. This was the major reason that the NAP was banned in Pakistan because some of its leaders found their way into insurgency. (Himayat, 2015)

Baluch people have always remained warriors and a resistance element has always prevailed. From the first day, the Baluch people have shown resistance against the state, The Baluchistan is deprived of many different necessities of life, enriched with minerals, and this province is the most under-developed. The state has made a narrative that Baluchistan is underdeveloped because of its Sardars, while there are only three or four tribal chiefs who are against the state, while the other have joined the electoral process.

Bhutto launched an operation against the Baluch, this operation claimed many lives, while many were arrested. At the height of the conflict between the Baluch insurgents and the Pakistani state, almost 80,000 Pakistani troops fought, while Baluch insurgents around 55,000. During Zia's regime, he released almost 6000 Baluch militants, it was an amnesty given by the Zia's regime to Baluch Fighters. However, it is ironic that the root causes of the militancy were either not identified or there were no efforts made to eradicate this. (Paul, 2013)

Since the terrorists also commit their fair share of racially motivated killings, some of the methods used by them are equally reprehensible. The Baluch Liberation Army only attacked the security forces in the early stages of the rebellion. The targets were the Pakistani state and its institutions, which were seen as tools of Punjab's dominance rather than regular Punjabis. But after the insurgency's political leadership was killed off physically or politically, militant attacks

on civilians also began. Political leaders making careless comments like NawabKhairBaksh Marri, who said, "He could coexist with a pig but not with Punjabi,"

One major operation was launched by Gen Musharaff against Nawab Akbar Bugti-led fighters in 2006. An Army officer had raped a Baluch Doctor at the Sui gas plant, in response to which Nawab asked the authorities to take action against the Rapist, but no actions as per expectations were taken and in its response, the Baluch people took up arms. In response to this insurgency, Musharaff launched an operation, Nawab was killed in the mountainous area of Kohlu. (Bansal, 2006)

One instance has received a lot of attention both in Pakistan and overseas. Three political activists, including the leader of the Baluch National Movement, Ghulam Mohammed Baluch, were kidnapped from their attorney's office in a Turbat courthouse on April 3, 2009. On the day that the Turbat Anti-Terrorist Court dismissed all charges against them, the abduction took place. Six days later, their remains were discovered in a mountainous region some 40 kilometers from the city. The three activists' deaths signaled a more violent shift in strategy and the start of the kill-and-dump operations. After that, they started becoming more and more.

In addition to activists and insurgents, sympathizers with the insurgency, suspected nationalists, students, teachers, lawyers, journalists, and other educated individuals are also victims of these operations.

The Pakistani press also alleges the deployment of killing squads made up of Baluch weapons for hire, similar to the Al Shams and Al Badr militias that the Pakistani military used during the Bangladesh war, despite the military and intelligence agencies' denials of these accusations.⁵⁰ The murder squads currently operating in Baluchistan were purportedly organized by intelligence services to combat the Marris, Mengals, and Bugtis by causing chaos and obstructing their activities.

They might even appoint Baluch nationalists to replace tribal elders, making Baluch nationalism wholly submissive to Islamabad.

Mainly there is one group that has led the armed struggle against the state, they are called the BLA or the Baluchistan Liberation Army, and there is another group that is called the BLF or the Baluch Liberation Front. In recent years a new hike in terror-related activities is seen. Many of the attacks are claimed by the Baluch Liberation Army. The BLA has now started organizing itself. The Army is better equipped, it wears a uniform with a proposed flag of Baluchistan on it. They have training grounds in Pakistan and the guerillas are trained there instead of getting training from neighboring Afghanistan and Iran. BLA has established its Majeed Brigade and has activated it, the Majeed Brigade is associated with various recent activities. The Majeed Brigade is basically a suicide squad that is responsible for attacking foreigners' especially Chinese officials working on the CPEC project with BLA's suicide bombers.

Operation ZarPahazar was launched by the BLA, it was an operation that was specially conducted to claim Baluchistan's coast and to not allow China and Pakistan to establish any economic activity in Gawadr Baluchistan. The Baluch militants have issued their agenda regarding the use of Baluchistan's land for any foreign activity without their consent.

The Baluch insurgents have however changed their strategy in accordance with negotiations. They refused to talk to any Civil-Military leadership of Pakistan, but in a few instances, they did now. In 2022 two military trainees of the Pakistan Army were abducted, and they offered Pakistani authorities to do a prisoner swap. It was reported that they wanted their leader Gulzar Imam in return for those two trainees. Gulzar Imam alias Shambay was arrested in Turkey and produced in front of the media and is on the legal papers, unlike many Baluch fighters and locals who went missing without any record. Pakistani authorities did not respond to the offer but they launched an operation in the Area.

Baluch insurgents are reportedly getting their supplies from the Afghan land, they are however seen equipped with modern American weapons in the post-American withdrawal. Pakistani caretaker Prime Minister Mr Anwar ul Haq Kakar has accused American forces of leaving their equipment while leaving Afghanistan. He has shown his grievances by saying that the same equipment is being used by the terrorists against Pakistan. American State Department has responded that the American-made weapons in Afghanistan are those left by the Afghan National Army.

The fight against the Pakistani military is especially concentrated in the central Baluchistan and the western border. The question of logistics, supplies, and money is critical. Baluch fighters have associated themselves with various countries and agencies. During the Cold War, the Baluch insurgency was sponsored by the Soviet Union to some extent. While the Soviets stayed in Afghanistan they helped the Baluch insurgents with weapons and money. In the post-Cold War era, the Baluch liberation movement turned its eyes towards America and the West. The Baluch liberation movement has though turned its eyes towards the West but its agenda remains more inclined towards a secular Social Democratic state. The West has not involved itself in funding the insurgency but at the forums of the Global society and Human rights movements, the issues in Baluchistan are addressed. (Nooraiee, 2020)

The Indian and Afghan factors cannot be neglected, Iran also plays its part. Indian involvement in the Baluch freedom movement and insurgency is also not new. India and its intelligence agency RAW have remained involved in the conflict. They are involved in supplying arms as well as training the Baluch fighters. Kalbushan Yadav who was an ex-officer of the Indian Navy was arrested by the Pakistani authorities. Though there are almost no chances of any success in the near future but still the Baluch insurgency is a challenge for Pakistan. (Khetran, 2016) Natural calamities and disasters play an important role in guerrilla warfare and they favor the Guerillas. Pakistan has been hit by floods several times in recent years, and when floods hit Pakistan they almost separate the Baluch province from the rest of the country due to the floods in the mighty Indus River. One corps of the Pakistan Army is stationed in Baluchistan, but the insurgents have never played a decisive battle. There are two reasons why the Pakistani forces are at the upper hand. Efficient intelligence takes the information and hits the insurgents while the other is the lack of an Air Force by the Baluch fighters. Iran or Afghanistan can play their part by providing their intelligence and Air support but they don't.

Historically, when the rebellion started in East Pakistan, the armed struggle in Baluchistan went on a hype. That was a chance for the militants, if they were capable or powerful enough they would have liberated Baluchistan. The fight in Baluchistan was concluded with a State victory.

Here it is worth mentioning that a lot of force stationed in Quetta was moved to East Pakistan to fight the Mukti Bahini. Baluchistan was protected by a compromised strength and a low morale.

Baluchistan's electoral politics is in the hands of Pashtoon led by Mehmood Khan Achakzai, the Baluch National Party, and the National Party however the BAP or the Baluch National Party was created just before the 2018 elections. The BAP was tagged to be backed by the establishment, where all the pro-establishment people constituted the party. The 2018 election was allegedly rigged and so was the election in Baluchistan. The Province that is already deprived, where people have picked arms against the state is also deprived of its constitutional right of electing their own representatives in the National and provincial assemblies. The state has tried to address the Baluch issue by saying that most of the people in the Key positions are from Baluchistan i.e. Chairman senate, the Prime minister, and two justices in the Supreme Court. The question arises if the people of Baluchistan think that these people are their representatives, the answer is certainly not.

Conclusion:

This study underscores the complexities of the Baluch insurgency in Pakistan. While the current capabilities of Baluch militant groups may not translate into territorial control, they undoubtedly pose a security threat to the Pakistani state. The current governance structure, perceived as dominated by Rawalpindi-Islamabad and lacking legitimacy due to compromised elections, fuels resentment among the Baluch population.

A crucial step towards fostering stability lies in addressing the root causes of the insurgency. This necessitates a shift away from purely military solutions and a genuine commitment to democratic processes. Free and fair elections, ensuring the emergence of representative leadership, can help build trust amongst the Baluch people.

Furthermore, Pakistan must recognize the strategic and economic potential of Baluchistan. The province's proximity to the resource-rich Gulf region presents immense development opportunities. By prioritizing Baluchistan's prosperity, Pakistan can foster economic integration and create a win-win scenario for both the province and the nation. This necessitates ensuring Baluchistan receives a fair share of the benefits derived from its mineral and natural resources.

However, achieving lasting peace requires a two-way street. Baluch militant groups must also commit to dialogue and abandon aspirations for independence, which appear increasingly unrealistic. A more viable path lies in pursuing a prosperous Baluchistan within a federal Pakistan, where Baluch citizens enjoy equal rights and economic autonomy.

Addressing the narrative of marginalization, widely held by the Baluch people and their Sardars, requires concrete confidence-building measures. Peace talks offer a crucial platform to address grievances and chart a path towards a more just and equitable future for Baluchistan. Ultimately, lasting stability hinges on a multi-pronged approach that prioritizes both development and genuine political participation for the Baluch people. Only then can Baluchistan fulfill its potential as a driver of Pakistan's economic prosperity.

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