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469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



Pakistan's Baluchistan Problem

Shahid Javed Burki¹

Abstract

A resolution tabled by Dana Rohrabacher, a Republican Congressman from California and with recent history of work against Pakistan, has suggested that the United States should lend support to the demand by some nationalists from Baluchistan to obtain independence for their province. These nationalists have been fighting the Pakistani state for decades. While the tabling of the resolution will not affect the American policy towards Pakistan, it has focused the attention of many in Pakistan on the country's Baluchistan problem. The Baluch account for only 2.5 percent of Pakistan's population of 180 million. However, they live in a sensitive area. Their province has borders with Afghanistan and Iran. A deep water port has been developed at Gwadar on the province's Mekran coast that may provide access to the sea to China's landlocked provinces in the country's west. This paper suggests a number of steps that can be taken to address Baluchi resentment. Some of these have already been taken. These include the devolution of authority to the provinces by amending the constitution and by a near-doubling of the share of the province in the "divisible pool" – the resources mobilised by the federal government for use by the provinces. More needs to be done to bring in the Baluchi population in Pakistan's expanding political space.

Baluchistan's Past

What is called Baluchistan today was not governed as a province by the British when they ruled India. The area was divided into a number of semi-autonomous princely states and an "agency" administered by an agent appointed by the government in New Delhi. Kalat was the largest state of the area. The then ruler, the Khan of Kalat, resisted joining Pakistan when the latter achieved independence in 1947. He seriously toyed with the idea of acceding to India,

¹ Mr Shahid Javed Burki is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be reached at sjburki@yahoo.com. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute.

an offer that was not accepted by Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister. It took the threat of military action by the new government to obtain the state's accession to Pakistan. The state's ruling prince, the Khan of Kalat, went into exile. That is where his descendants live and lend support to the idea of creating an independent state of Baluchistan.

In 1955, what is called Baluchistan today was merged with the other areas of West Pakistan to form an administrative unit called the "one unit". This was done to introduce the concept of "parity" as a solution to Pakistan's constitutional problem: how to balance East Bengal, by far the largest province by population, in Pakistan's federation. There was hope that by dividing the country into two provinces – East and West Pakistan – and giving them equal representation in the national legislature the country could construct a durable political structure. It would provide balance in the planned political system. The hope was not realised. East Pakistan remained unhappy and ultimately left Pakistan to become the independent state of Bangladesh. West Pakistan's smaller provinces – Baluchistan and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa in particular – felt that they had lost the little bit of autonomy they had by being merged into a much larger administrative unit. West Pakistan's capital was located at Lahore, close to a thousand miles from Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan. However, the concept of parity was the foundation on which General Ayub Khan, Pakistan's first military president, built a new political structure by promulgating the constitution of 1962. The general, while aware that the smaller provinces were not happy with the arrangement, did little to assuage their concerns.

In 1969 when the government of President Ayub Khan fell, his successor dissolved the "One Unit of West Pakistan" into four provinces including Baluchistan. It is Pakistan's largest province in terms of area— 134,051 sq. miles or 44 per cent of the total. According to the population census of 1998, the province had eight million people equivalent to five per cent of the total. The rate of fertility is higher than the rest of Pakistan which means that the share in population must have increased to possibly 5.5 per cent of the total by 2012. This means that the province's population is now close to 10 million. The ethnic composition has changed significantly. About 40 per cent of the population speaks Baluchi; another 40 per cent speaks Pashto while the remaining 20 per cent speak Brahui, Urdu and Punjabi². Counting those who live outside the province, Pakistan's Baluch population is about 4.5 million, or 2.5 per cent of the total.

Gwadar, a deep water port built in the 1990s and the early 2000s with Chinese assistance, is now the province's second largest urban centre. The port's development work started on 22 March 2002 during the tenure of General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's fourth military president. The first phase was completed three years later in March 2005 with the construction of three multi-purpose berths. The port is managed by PSA International, a subsidiary of the Port of Singapore Authority. While it has failed to achieve some of the goals spelled out by the administration headed by President Pervez Musharraf when its first phase was constructed, it now offers a viable alternative to the congested port of Karachi. Gwadar is

² Government of Pakistan, Percentage distribution of households by language usually spoken and region/province, Pakistan Statistical Year Book, 2008.

also strategically located. It is close to the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz and offers the shortest route to the oil-rich but landlocked states of Central Asia.

A system of highways is being built to connect the port with Karachi and also with the areas in the country's northeast. The aim is to build an all-weather highway that would connect China's landlocked provinces in the country's west to Gwadar and thus to the sea. However, the Baluchi nationalists resent the development of the port having concluded that like the large deposits of natural gas in the province, it would benefit other parts of the country and not their own province. The nationalists believe that by attracting migrant workers from all over the country, the port is contributing to changing the demographic profile of the province.

Quetta, the province's capital, was built by the British as forward army post in the coloniser's attempt to tame the wild west of their Indian domain. It housed a large contingent of the British Indian army. After Pakistan achieved independence, the military turned the city into a major cantonment housing the Army Staff College. At one time it was also the centre of the Electrical and Mechanical Engineers, the army's technical arm. The city attracted a great deal of migrants from all parts of Pakistan. Punjabis arrived to take advantage of the jobs available in the public sector. For instance, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, the current Chief Justice of Pakistan's Supreme Court is from Baluchistan but is of Punjabi descent. Pathans from the neighboring province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhawa came to provide labour for the construction of infrastructure in the province. The city now has a population of 2.5 million people, one-quarter of the provincial total.

Insurgencies in Baluchistan

Since Pakistan's creation in 1947, Baluch nationalists have waged five insurgencies seeking greater autonomy and control over the province's considerable resources – not just natural gas that was discovered in 1957 at a place called Sui and is the main source of fuel for industry and households in most of Pakistan. However, the gas took time to reach Quetta and other parts of Baluchistan. A vast network of pipelines managed by gas supply companies – Sui Northern Gas Pipeline and Sui Southern Gas Pipeline – radiate out from Sui and reach many distant parts of Pakistan. Baluchistan, however, is poorly covered. Since the companies are headquartered in Karachi, they have not provided many employment opportunities to the Baluchis with education and skills. The province also has large deposits of copper and gold. A copper mine at Sandak, near the border with Afghanistan, has brought a Chinese company to the area.

Islamabad has responded to the Baluch insurgencies mostly with an iron fist. "In 1972, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto reinvigorated an army defeated by India in 1971 by sending it to quell the Baluchi uprising. Thousands died", wrote Pervez Hoodbhoy, the nuclear-scientist-turned-newspaper-columnist in a comment on what has come to be called the Rohrabacher incident. (The incident is discussed below.) "In 2006 under General Pervez Musharraf the Army claimed the killing of 80-year old Nawab Akbar Bugti as yet another victory, saying this would end the insurgency. But it turned out otherwise, and Bugti's murder was yet another thread torn loose from the unravelling national fabric. Vengeful Baluch nationalists now

target non-Baluch innocents and have murdered, among others, Punjabi and Muhajir teachers”.³

The latest rebellion has included fierce clashes between the Pakistani military and the underground Baluchistan Liberation Army, BLA. The government estimates that the most recent insurgency involves a force of about 1,300 battle hardened fighters who are engaged in skirmishes with the Frontier Constabulary. FC draws most of its manpower from the Pashtun population in the province. This has led to another ethnic dimension to the conflict. In fact, the state’s investment in developing the province has brought in a significant number of Pashtun workers to the province, many of them with experience of work in the construction projects in the Middle East. According to one assessment, the insurgents are killing the “poor labourers working on road and development projects because they say they don’t want any development projects in their areas, that they will develop the areas themselves after they’ve gained independence”.⁴

Baluchistan: The Rohrabacher Incident

As reported in several American newspapers, “an inflammatory call by an American congressman for the secession of Pakistan’s largest province has sparked uproar in the country, injecting fresh complications into stalled efforts to restart relations between Washington and Islamabad. The furor stems from a non-binding resolution introduced Friday [17 February 2012] by Representative Dana Rohrabacher, Republican of California, which stated that the people of Baluchistan, a sprawling western province racked by a seven-year old separatist insurgency, should have the right of self-determination and to their own sovereign country”. The Congressman, who leads the House Foreign Affairs Sub-committee on Oversight and Investigations, “has a recent history of aggressive Congressional action against Pakistan. ‘They’ve constantly been a two-faced enemy of the United States’, he said in a telephone interview”.⁵ He had the support of two other members of his sub-committee – Louie Gohmert and Steve King – who joined him in co-sponsoring the resolution.

The Congressman has a record of working against Pakistan. He has sought to limit American aid to Pakistan; he has suggested that Dr. Shakil Afridi, a Pakistani who helped lead the Central Intelligence Agency to Osama bin Laden should be given an American passport and Congressional Gold Medal; and he held a Congressional hearing on 8 February that included testimony from human rights groups and Pakistani experts. The sub-committee also heard from Ralph Peters, a former United States military officer, who in 2005 wrote a strategy paper that included a hypothetical map of an independent Baluchistan, drawn from parts of Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

The Rohrabacher resolution was condemned by several senior Pakistani officials including Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani, Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar, and Sherry

³ Pervez Hoodbhoy, “Is Rohrabacher wrong on Baluchistan?” Express Tribune, 27 February 2012, p. 7.

⁴ Cyril Almeida, Baluchistan, the unattributable story, Dawn, February 26, 2012, p. 7.

⁵ Declan Walsh, “Fury in Pakistan after Congressman suggests that a province leave”, The New York Times, February 22, 2012, p. A4.

Rehman, the new Pakistani ambassador to the United States. As was to be expected it drew the support of the Baluchi nationalists, in particular those living outside Pakistan. Congressman Rohrabacher had help from Suleiman Daud, the current Khan of Kalat, who lives in exile in Cardiff, Wales. The hearing conducted by Rohrabacher's sub-committee and the tabling of the resolution based on it resulted in two summons in seven days to Richard Hoagland, the U.S. charge d'affaires, by Pakistan's Foreign Office. He was called in to convey Islamabad's strong protests over perceived US support for Baluch separatists.

But the protest against Rohrabacher was not confined to the Pakistani leadership and bureaucracy. According to one American newspaper report, "Pakistani leaders and the public exploded with anger, street protests and claims that the United States wants to dismember Pakistan. The resolution, though it had no force of law, stirred traumatic memories here of the 1971 secessionist uprising that led to the loss of East Pakistan and creation of Bangladesh".⁶ A visit to Pakistan by a US Congressional delegation provided an opportunity to express Pakistan's anger and frustration. The delegation was led by David Dreier, chairman of the House Rules Committee. It was a sub-committee of this committee that was headed by Congressman Rohrabacher and had held the hearing that led to the presentation of the Baluchistan resolution. Initially the meetings with the Pakistanis "were very tense," Dreier said in Islamabad but the anti-US rhetoric moderated after the visitors swore they did not support breakaway Baluchistan. "I want to convey to the people, and the government of Pakistan, that the US is committed to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Pakistan", Drier told the local media after the group met Thursday [23 February] with Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani and offered him similar assurances. The visiting delegation also explained how the US legislative process works. The Rohrabacher resolution is among thousands of resolutions introduced so far in 212th Congress that started functioning in January 2011 following the elections of November 2010"⁷. There was no expectation that the tabled resolution would go any further.

What is the solution?

Notwithstanding the aspirations of the really radical Baluchis and some of the US Congressmen, independence for Baluchistan is not a solution for the province's problems. As Anatol Lieven wrote in his recent book on Pakistan, "if the Pathans of the province are stirred up against the Pakistani state, their latent tensions with the Baluch would also be awakened, above all concerning who should rule Quetta itself. Baluch nationalists who say that an independent Baluchistan would be prepared to let the Pathan areas break away to join a new Baluchistan fall very silent when you ask them what then will happen to Quetta. With Pathans against Pakistan and Baluch (and other Pathans), and Hazaras and others caught in the middle, that would have all the makings of a really unspeakable mess".⁸

⁶ Richard Leiby, "U.S. delegation greeted with uproar in Pakistan", The Washington Post, February 25, 2012. p. A10.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Anatol Lieven, Pakistan: A Hard Country, New York, Public Affairs, 2011, p. 342.

It is only with broad political and economic development that Pakistan will be able to placate those who have taken up arms to challenge the state. The state is much too powerful for the insurgents to stage a successful operation and achieve. However, the Baluchis' resentment at having been left behind will need a concerted action by the state on several fronts – institutional, political, and economic. Some of the recent attempts to bring government closer to the people by transferring a significant amount of authority to the provinces are a step in the right direction. The eighteenth amendment to the constitution passed in the summer of 2010 has fulfilled the promise made to the smaller provinces at the time the constitution of 1973 was written. It was said then that they would be given rights and responsibilities to mind their own affairs. That would have satisfied some of the demands of the Baluchi nationalists⁹. The 18th amendment devolution followed those made in the formula for transferring financial resources from the centre to the provinces. The seventh National Finance Commission issued its award in November 2009, basing distribution not only on population as was the case in the previous six awards but on several other considerations as well. As the Institute of Public Policy wrote in its 2011 annual report, the 2009 award for the first time adopts “a revenue sharing formula for the divisible pool...to ensure that a degree of fiscal equalisation occurs through the inclusion of indicators like backwardness/poverty” to determine provincial shares. Under the new formula, Baluchistan's share has almost doubled from those adopted by the earlier awards. It will increase from 5.3 percent in 1991 and 1996, to 5.11 percent in 2006, to 9.09 percent in 2009.¹⁰

At the same time an attempt should be made to bring the disaffected within the province by encouraging them to participate in the political and economic process. The moderate elements chose to stay out of politics in the elections of 2008. This created space for the more radical elements. In the next national and provincial elections due in the next one year those who opted out of the political process should be encouraged to join it.

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⁹ Shahid Javed Burki, “The 18th amendment: Pakistan's Constitution Redesigned” ISAS Working Paper No. 112, 3 September, 2010, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore.

¹⁰ Institute of Public Policy, State of the Economy: Devolution in Pakistan, Lahore 2011, p. 90.