

## **Crisis in Balochistan: challenges and opportunities**

**Mir Sher Baz Khetran\***

*Wáhde pa ġaríbáñ ki jaháñ tang bibít  
Láp húrak, badan lúč pa badrang bibít  
Haq int ča čušėñ wár o azábeñ zindá  
Máří bisučant, sar birawant, jang bibít*

– *Mir Gul Khan Nasir*

**W**hen the world starts to constrict around the poor man;  
His mutilated naked form is left to fend for his hungry gut; then  
its better from this life of misery and torture;  
if war ensues, heads roll & lavish palaces are burnt to the ground.

### **Introduction**

Balochistan is the largest province of Pakistan, making up approximately 43 per cent of the total area of the country. It is also the poorest and least populated. It is rich in mineral resources and the major supplier of natural gas after Sindh. One of the world's biggest copper deposits have been found at Reko Diq in the Chaghi district of Balochistan; and these are believed to be even greater than those at Sarcheshmesh in Iran and Escondido in Chile, which are the second and third largest proven deposits of copper in the world, respectively. Indeed, as one analyst notes, "If it were not for the strategic location of Balochistan and the rich potential of oil, uranium and other resources, it would be difficult to anyone fighting over this bleak, desolate and forbidding land."<sup>1</sup>

Pakistan has strong geopolitical importance in the region, due mainly to the geo-strategic location of its southwestern province Balochistan, which is situated at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East. It shares a 723-mile-long border with Afghanistan in the northwest and a 520-mile-long border with Iran in the west, while the

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Indus Valley bounds it to the east and the Arabian Sea to the south. Regions like Afghanistan, Iran and the Persian Gulf, rich in oil and gas reserves, surround it. While on the one hand it is located in the midst of natural resources, Balochistan's coast also lies opposite to the Strait of Hormuz, which is an important route for global oil supplies. Thus, it has the potential to become a centre of international trade.<sup>2</sup>

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infrastructure, education and health facilities. Although large transnational pipeline projects, the Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India and the Iran-Pakistan-India, have been negotiated by the government of Pakistan, they remain unimplemented despite the energy shortfall in the country.

This lack of enthusiasm to utilize Balochistan's strategic location is because of several major reasons, foremost being the tribal setup of the Baloch society even at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Another primary reason that can be counted for this neglect is mainly political, concerned with the grievances of the Baloch people vis-à-vis the federal government which has in the past carried out several major military operations against what are referred to as 'Baloch nationalists' led by tribal leaders. These operations have given rise to feelings for an independent Balochistan – feelings that are prone to exploitation by external forces that have stakes in the ongoing 'war on terror' along the Baloch frontier with southern Afghanistan.

Today, a major challenge facing Pakistan is the conversion of its strategic assets in Balochistan into economic opportunities, and the possibility of opening the province to international trade and investment.<sup>3</sup> Despite the fact that it is rich in term of resources and has a strategic location, Balochistan remains backward in terms of socioeconomic development as compared to other provinces. The dilemma is that, being

far from the capital Islamabad, it has constantly been ignored by successive governments that would promise improvement in the situation in their election agendas while nothing concrete would emerge on ground. One finds deplorable figures of rural poverty in Balochistan: it was 21.1 per cent in 1998-99 and jumped up to 56.6 per cent in 2005-06, witnessing an increase of around 200 per cent.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, things are going from bad to worse.

There is thus a growing sense of frustration among the Baloch people who believe that Balochistan is part of the federation only on paper and is at the mercy of a State that continues to exploit its natural wealth.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the Sardars and Nawabs, who are the ruling influential members of the province, have also been criticised for obstructing educational development and empowerment of the Baloch people for their own ends, as a means to maintain their hegemonic power in the region. With the help of the ruling establishment and their huge influence in the region, the Sardars have controlled the people and the lower administration of their districts. If any development funds are allotted to the region, corruption hinders actual progress and prevents them from being utilised for proposed development projects.

In the last decade, the poor law and order situation, growing sense of deprivation, and vociferous political demands have made the situation worse. The government's lack of initiatives in the region has been a major issue besides other challenges that include the following:

- 1) Governance;
- 2) The Sardari system;
- 3) Socioeconomic problems;
- 4) Sense of deprivation;
- 5) Marginalization; and
- 6) Foreign involvement.

These are examined in some detail below, before concluding by providing suggestions to improve the situation in Balochistan, and subsequently in the rest of the country.

## Governance

**In the region, the Sardars enjoy unlimited power and authority and maintain dominance over the masses without fear of the slightest challenge.**

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The major governance issues include incompetence in the political and administrative institutions, weak writ of the government and absence of rule of law. The treasury benches in Balochistan indulge in making money and are least interested in providing facilities and services to the people. Some analysts see the provincial government as weak and ineffective by its very design. It is perhaps the only example of a government in the world where all legislators, with the exception of one or two members, are part of the executive. Thus, with no opposition in the house, a major facet of guidance on governance and performance issues is missing.

The provincial civil services and the local cadre are also ineffective and inefficient, while federal civil servants assigned to Balochistan do not share the province's priorities. Therefore, provincial aspirations eventually remain unfulfilled. Decision-making remains firmly in the hands of elements that were in command before the February 2008 elections. There is a hold of the army over Balochistan and law and order and other major governance issues are in its control.

District-level government and administration systems could be much more effective and responsive than a provincial government in Quetta. But the government of Balochistan abolished the local government system, established by former President Pervez Mushrraf's Local Government Ordinance of 2001, in August 2010. Issues such as inter-tribal rivalries, infighting, and exercise of power and money at the local level to win elections are stated to be some of the reasons for the ineffectiveness of that system, the abolition of which means a reversion to centralization. These governance challenges have deep social roots as political leaders at all

levels are more likely to secure positions of formal authority through social networks and patronage rather than through free and fair processes. Citizens are also more likely to access basic services through personal networks of kin, clan and caste, informal intermediaries and facilitation payments than through formalized procedures and processes. Policy and legislation in many key areas is not followed through with the essential enabling legislation, rules and procedures to make them workable. Moreover, public attitudes toward political processes and service delivery reveal deep distrust and low expectations. Voter turnout in Balochistan is among the lowest in Pakistan as people have little faith in public services and are more likely to turn to informal systems of adjudication and service delivery administered by local tribal elders.

### **Sardari system**

Before the British came to the subcontinent, the Sardari system was not based on inheritance. It was based on merit and competence, and only competent individuals would become Sardars of the tribe. Inheritance weakens the system and thus people started talking against this leadership approach.

In fact, one of the main reasons for deprivation, backwardness and political crisis in Balochistan is the inherited Sardari system. This is largely accountable for the underdevelopment of the province as the Sardars are least bothered about their clansmen. At present, the Sardari system is the basic feature of Balochistan in general and of Baloch areas in particular. In the region, the Sardars enjoy unlimited power and authority and maintain dominance over the masses without fear of the slightest challenge. Mir Ahmed Yar Khan, the last Khan of Balochistan, stated that the Baloch people were treated as lifeless pawns on the chessboard. The use of force is common even for the collection of taxes, and in the 1970s, at a place near Sibi, eighteen people lost their lives as a result of failing to pay the *Sashak* – the Sardar's share in the revenue earned by his clansmen.

Abdul Kareem Bizenjo started a national movement against this illegal practice that imposed a heavy burden on the poor masses; however, he was murdered by the opposing Sardars. In the tribal areas, owners of herds of forty or more animals have to pay a tax to the Sardar to get access to pastures and waters under his jurisdiction.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the Sardars oppose opening schools in areas under their control – some are even against providing electricity in their areas. Girls' schools are still virtually nonexistent and there are very few educated Baloch girls from the tribal areas.<sup>7</sup>

The government needs to stop backing the Sardars and give aid for development projects for the province before the situation in Balochistan goes out of hand.<sup>8</sup> The state apparatus in Islamabad has been secretly supporting pro-establishment tribal notables to contest elections against committed representatives; getting those elected who are not the true representatives of the people.

One often hears that the Baloch movement is only a stunt by the Sardars to keep their medieval privileges safe from the modernizing influence of Pakistan. Alternately and somewhat contradictorily, one also hears that only few Baloch Sardars are associated with the Baloch national movement. The truth is more complicated. The Baloch intelligentsia, by and large, has no sympathy for pro-establishment Sardars. As for the nationalist Sardars, whatever reservations they may have with regard to their contemporary social relevance, they regard them as essential assets and symbols in the political struggle against exploitation at the hands of Pakistan's ruling elite. Accordingly, the nationalist Sardars are wholeheartedly supported, particularly those from the elder generation who led the fourth Baloch rebellion or freedom struggle that started after Akbar Bugti's assassination in 2006.<sup>9</sup>

Former Prime Minister of Pakistan Z. A. Bhutto, in a public meeting in Quetta on April 8, 1976, recognized the problem of the Sardari system and announced his intention to abolish it; however, these efforts did not lead anywhere. The debate about abolishing the system has been under consideration in the Balochistan legislative assembly but the Sardars, who are also members of the assembly, have generally advocated its continuity on different grounds. The main arguments have included: the historic evolution of an institution that provided a defence to the people; a social and economic system; a progressive order of the society in accordance with socioeconomic and military requirements; an unavoidable feature of society; and an institution with no substitute or alternative.

### **Socioeconomic problems**

Balochistan is an impoverished province of Pakistan. It has the weakest long-term growth performance of all provinces in the country, according to World Bank study. Balochistan's economic report of 2009 took into account statistics from the time period of 1972-73 to 2005-06

and analysed the economical expansion of each province and found out that the economic expansion of Balochistan is the lowest in comparison with other province.

Balochistan stands out as the province with the worst social indicators. Backwardness rules supreme across the province. The people have run out of civic facilities and economic opportunities at large. Even in the 21st Century, Balochistan presents a gloomy picture of the Medieval Age. Its social sector indicators, which are among the most challenging in South Asia, rightly place it in the category of least developed and most backward province of Pakistan. Female primary school enrolment is not more than 20 per cent. In rural areas, only 39 per cent of households have access to potable water sources within a 2-kilometer distance from their homes. According to an estimate, only in five districts (out of 30), sanitation is accessible to more than 51 per cent of the population; in nine districts adequate sanitation is available to 26–50 per cent of the population; and in 13 districts, household sanitation coverage is only 4–25 per cent. In most districts, less than three per cent of the population has access to wastewater disposal facilities.<sup>10</sup>

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Illiteracy in the province is also one of the main reasons of its backwardness. Baloch Sardars are driven by their interest to maintain the status quo and block the education system. According to the acting Chief Secretary, Balochistan, the following is the main reason for the lack of educational facilities in the province:<sup>11</sup>

“Due to lack of initiatives undertaken by the government towards education in the province, people send their children to madrassas due to incentives of free education, boarding and lodging. The quality of education of madrassa is poor. The last government of MMA in

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Balochistan and the present government has started funding madrassas instead on schools. This act of government is promoting madrassa system in the province. Federal government needs serious rethink on education policy of Balochistan.”

At present, there is no Talibanization underway in Balochistan, yet the province provides an environment that is favourable for Taliban recruitment, as the province is reeling under abject poverty and illiteracy. Prevailing economic backwardness, lack of employment opportunities and worsening law and

order situation in the province may push the disgruntled and frustrated youth to join the Taliban camp. The people of the province are technologically backward. Illiteracy is high and hence the people lack initiative and entrepreneurial ability.<sup>12</sup>

### **Sense of deprivation**

There is the example of a gas field in Sui which was established in 1952. It provides an estimated 38 percent of Pakistan’s total, while leaving Balochistan with a mere six to seven per cent. Out of the thirty districts in Balochistan, only four receive gas, whereas 83 per cent of gas has been diverted to Punjab. The percentage of gas royalty that the province of Balochistan receives from the government is just 12.5, a rate that is the lowest in the world.

The Balochistan policy needs a rethink by Islamabad. Remote-controlling the province via civil armed forces would breed resentment and support for apolitical tribal chiefs as an alternative against the popular Baloch leadership which will promote corruption, bad governance and lead to harmful future.<sup>13</sup>

### **Marginalization**

Since Pakistan’s creation, the federal establishment has kept one purpose in mind: to marginalize the nationalist movement in Balochistan, together with putting an end to violence temporarily but not permanently.



Sustainable termination of civil war requires a step-by-step process of disarmament and security, confidence-building and the provision of a forum in which the economic, political and social terms of the post-war phase can be defined. The only promising aspect of the war-like situation in Balochistan is that it still has not reached the point of a civil war. The government of Pakistan will have to take serious steps to prevent that from happening. For example, putting an end to military intervention and seriously addressing the issue of social discontent with respect to mega-project development.

Additionally, the process of building-confidence and taking the Baloch into confidence should be dealt with immediately. The central government must prove to the leaders of the nationalist movement in Balochistan and the province's population at large that the projects that now underway would mostly include the local population from the province, followed by the productive training and job assurance. Also, that a greater share of the revenue being generated from the soil of the province would be passed on to the local authorities of Balochistan. It has to be conceded, however, that building trust with the Baloch would not be easy.

The Baloch have had only a small role in the construction of Gwadar Port, a project entirely under the control of the central government. The project will benefit the people of Balochistan only if a massive effort is undertaken to train and recruit local residents and if the port is linked with the rest of Balochistan, which is not the case at present. Of the approximately 600 persons employed in the construction of the first phase of the project, only 100, and essentially daily-wage workers, were Baloch. There has also been only one road which joins Gwadar to Karachi, opening the port to the rest of the country.

Gwadar is the region's only deepwater port yet there is no distinct policy to turn it into a free trade zone. No effort has been made to train the local population so that they can find work at the project. There is no technical school or college in Gwadar or in the surrounding area. Additionally, the land around the port that was acquired below the market price by the Pakistan Navy and Coast Guard and distributed to officers has since been subject to a great deal of financial speculation. The Baloch in Gwadar fear that they will become a minority in their own land. If the central government's plans succeed, the population of Gwadar and its surrounding areas will rise from 70,000 to almost 2 million. The Baloch fear that most of them would come from Sindh and Punjab.

## **Foreign involvement**

Ever since the Balochistan crisis has started, foreign hands have been active promoting trouble in the province. The tug of war to reach the natural resources of the Central Asian Republics is generally called the Great Game with any number of regional as also extra-regional states trying to secure their respective interests.

At least six insurgents groups currently operate in Balochistan. With arms flowing in and training imparted to a large number of tribesmen, the dissidents with the support of their foreign friends are working to create enough strength to take the insurgency to a level where a Bangladesh-type situation could be created.

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## **Opportunities**

### *Gwadar*

The Gwadar Port can prove to be the hub of regional trade between Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, the Central Asian states and China. The port is the gateway to Central Asia from the West, providing the shortest entrance to the Arabian Sea. It can emerge as mother port of the region after the development of transit and transshipment facilities, oil storage, refinery and petrochemicals and export processing capable of serving the entire region.

For landlocked Central Asian economies, Balochistan offers excess to new resources and markets and the prospect of rapid growth. Gwadar port can provide them with warehousing facilities, along with transit and possibilities of import of goods.

Gwadar has all the natural advantages that can play a major role in serving as a corridor for energy, cargo and services between Central Asia, Gulf, China and other surrounding regions. By virtue of its geo-strategic location, Pakistan can serve as an energy corridor between the Gulf and China, and the Gwadar port can become a major outlet for trade between the China, Central Asia and the Gulf region.

The port can also play a key role in the proposed energy and trade corridor to China. Western China can benefit from the Gwadar seaport through the Sost dry port which will also create a string of economic activity along the proposed highway linking Gwadar with the Karakoram Highway in the north.

Strategically located between the regions with the largest energy reserves of the world like Central Asia and the countries with highest energy consumption like India and China, Pakistan is in a position to ensure energy security in the region by developing an efficient energy market and cross-border trade of energy.

If Gwadar is declared a free oil port in the Asian region, it can serve as the future petroleum hub meeting the oil transshipment requirements of different countries. Situated at the mouth of the Gulf, the Gwadar port will wait for transit of huge discovered and undiscovered estimated 2,500 billion barrels of oil in Central Asian region to different destinations as the fuel-thirsty nations are looking towards this region to meet their future energy needs. The port can handle very large crude containers of up to 0.5 million tons dead weight, which form a crucial part of the international oil movement.

Gwadar is destined to change the economic outlook of Pakistan and will bring prosperity to each individual, province and the country.

### *Reko Diq*

Reko Diq is a small town of Chaghi district in Balochistan, in a desert area seventy kilometres north-west of Naukundi, close to Pakistan's border with Iran and Afghanistan. Reko Diq's proven gold and copper reserves are worth US \$260 billion and estimated gold and copper reserves worth US \$ 3 trillion.

As already noted, the copper and gold deposits at Reko Diq are believed to be even bigger than those of Sarcheshmeh in Iran and Escondida in Chile. The people of Balochistan feel dispossessed by this unjust Reko Diq project as the agreement with TCC which has not only undermined the rights of the Baloch people but also depriving them of billions of dollars. The strategy to end deprivation in Balochistan based on major economic development projects has failed to demonstrate tangible results to the Baloch.

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This is probably due to the emphasis on material culture (construction of mega project), and not on the non-material culture (developing human capabilities). The government must work in developing human capabilities and professionalism among the local people of Balochistan, which is important for the labour-intensive industries. Until the focus involves both the factors and the Baloch become more involved, the

development projects will continue to be reviewed as a tool of exploitation.

The government must reorient the education system to enhance skill development, productivity and employment and meet the challenge of competition posed by technological advancement. The added emphasis on human skill development will require a dramatic effort to educate and train workers, so that they can play a larger role in the province's economic development.

### **Suggestions**

1. The way forward is that power should be transferred to the true representative of the people and management of resources should be in the hands of the Baloch themselves.
2. Islamabad should not exploit the resources of Balochistan; give the province its due share in gas and revenues earned from the extraction of other minerals. Demilitarization of the province is extremely important. The government has taken the initiative to withdraw the army from two districts of Balochistan. This process should continue until there is only a minimum-level presence of army in the province.
3. The government should ensure implementation of the 7<sup>th</sup> NFC award, the Aghaza-e-Haqooqae Balochistan package and the 18<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment. So far, Baloch nationalists are sceptical of these political initiatives, and only a visible change on ground can help reduce the nationalists' separatist and anti-federation sentiments.

4. The security forces and law enforcement agencies, the Levies and the Balochistan Constabulary should be trained, equipped and resourced to maintain law and order in the province. The Levies system should be strengthened instead of giving policing responsibilities to the FC. There are ambiguities regarding the mandate and jurisdiction of law enforcement agencies. Such confusion should be done away with by assigning each agency its mandated role.
5. All illegally detained and missing persons should be released or produced in courts immediately. So far, the government has failed to solve the issue of the missing persons, whose number is on the increase. A judicial commission that has the confidence of families of the missing people should be set up to probe the issue and also to look into the charges and cases filed against them.
6. Unregulated movement of people across the borders with Iran and Afghanistan is a permanent threat not only to Pakistan but also to Iran and Afghanistan. Taliban, Jundullah and sectarian extremists can take advantage and easily cross to the other side after making mischief in one country.
7. The job quota for the Baloch should be increased in all the sectors. Special job packages should be announced for the Baloch that may include jobs from grade 12 to 20.
8. The Balochistan government should work out a road map for development and for donor agencies with a view to guide them properly to invest in various priority sectors such as education, health and small to medium enterprises in areas like mining, marble, coal and fisheries, etc. where development projects can be launched. The government should prepare and share with international agencies project proposals which must include details of a roadmap and guidelines for launch, monitoring and implementation of projects in a transparent manner.

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9. To encourage foreign investors and international development agencies, improvement in security and law and order is pivotal. The provincial government should ensure the international and local development agencies personnel are provided with adequate security, particularly at development sites.
10. The Balochistan government should establish polytechnic institutes with a view to training people as skilled workers and creating a workforce that could be utilized in ongoing and future development projects and different industries in the province. That will not only create job opportunities for the youth but will allay fears of the Baloch about being robbed of their rights and resources by 'outsiders'. The main objection of some Baloch segments to mega development projects such as Gwadar deep-sea port has been that few local workers have been engaged and no training facilities provided to enable the local youth to join the workforce of these projects. Such training programmes should be based in the areas where they can respond to the requirement of work opportunities so that the locals benefit the most.
11. Fishery-related industries with efficient storage and packaging facilities should be established. At present, the catch in the coastal areas of Balochistan is sent to the Persian Gulf states for packaging as the coastal areas of the province lack the skill and infrastructure. Livestock management facilities and infrastructure are also needed on a priority basis in the province. Education and research institutes to enhance livestock management skills and capacity should be established.
12. The marble industry can easily flourish in Balochistan, ensuring employment for around 150,000 people and also lead to 5 billion US dollars in annual income to the government.
13. The political parties should initiate a debate on different aspects of the conflict in Balochistan in and outside the parliament with a view to engage Baloch nationalist parties and leaders in evolving a consensus on how violence and insecurity can be reduced in Balochistan.
14. Political actors should also exert pressure on the federal government to implement the promised political and constitutional steps in the form of the NFC award, the Agha-e-Haqooqa-e-Balochistan package and the 18<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment.
15. Extrajudicial killings, especially those of civilians, have a negative impact on the Balochistan conflict. The security forces should try to put in place safeguards to prevent such casualties.

16. Transparency about the conduct of affairs must be ensured because misgivings over illegal detentions have dented the image of the security forces in the eyes of Baloch people.
17. International development agencies can initiate small and local-level projects in collaboration with the provincial government, particularly in the health and education sectors.
18. According to many observers, the role of the political elite today is far less significant than Pakistan's security establishment in Balochistan. This is due to weak political institutions, particularly in Balochistan, unstable democratic processes, and governance issues. Most of the people interviewed for this study suggest that a large part of conflict resolution efforts for Balochistan should be in the political domain. It is however not possible to do so without strengthening the political culture, and since the democratic order in the country is still in the making, their role is all the more relevant and significant.
19. Since Balochistan is sparsely populated, there are very few educational institutions in villages in remote areas. It is difficult to provide fair and uniform opportunities of education in all these villages. The education facilities that are available are generally in an abysmal condition and lack adequate staff and infrastructure. In order to improve access to education and increase enrolment; secondary, higher and professional (technical) educational schools/institution with boarding facilities should be established in major urban centres.
20. In those boarding schools and higher educational institutions, competent lecturers should be appointed, and teachers affiliated with the main universities in the country should also work as visiting faculty.
21. On the same pattern, model health units should be established in major urban centres and should be linked to peripheral rural areas either through road infrastructure or mobile services.
22. Vocational training institutes exclusively for women should be built to make the female population skilled and self-sufficient.

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23. Balochistan has the highest infant and maternal mortality rates in South Asia due to lack of access to basic health facilities and scarcity of trained female paramedical staff. Training of female paramedical staff could cater to a large number of women in remote villages.
24. The government also needs to recruit more Baloch into the military and police services and need to get involved in more confidence building measures.
25. At the same time, the government ought to undertake more developmental and infrastructure projects with focus on education.

These measures would hopefully reduce the secessionists' appeal in the province.

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