The western province of Pakistan, Balochistan, has been torn by separatist insurgencies since its annexation into the new born Muslim state in 1948. As the current conflict, which exploded in 2005, has now become less intensive, military actions have also changed their character. There is no open war in the traditional sense but there are new problems, like enforced disappearances, *kill and dump* operations, death squads, extrajudicial and target killing, which strike Balochistan. A famous phrase of the former president Pervez Musharraf addressed to the militants: "you won’t even know what hit you" (*Pakistan: the Worsening Conflict in Balochistan*, International Crisis Group, Asia Report no 119) has got a disturbingly literal interpretation.

*Zofia Mroczek* is Consultant at FAO
Who are Baloch nationalists?

According to the government, only 7% of the province is actually troubled, and that is due to the terror imposed on the population by some backward sardars\(^1\) protecting their own privileges\(^2\). On the contrary, the unrest is definitely much more than Islamabad claims. “It is not just the tribes but all Baloch people are fighting [for their rights], and most of them are ordinary Baloch” Abdul Rauf Mengal, a parliamentarian from the Balochistan National Party, says\(^3\).

However, not the whole of Baloch society, and not all to the same extent, adhere to the nationalist movement and reach for weapons. There is an entire myriad of more or less radical groups: parties demanding autonomy, militants struggling for national liberation and ordinary people searching for justice and a decent life.

Baloch nationalism has a dual basis. On one hand, it developed as a tribal identity repressed by a force perceived as foreign. Specific character of a tribal society is reflected in the strong reaction to the attacks on the collective identity. The individual is not at the center, it is the community that counts. So when threatened in its integrity, a tribal society is threatened also in its raison d’être, and reacts with a major compactness: the nationalism\(^4\).

However, divisions among the tribes are deep and they do not have a tradition of their own sovereign state\(^5\). “[Unlike] the Awami League, which led a Bengali nationalist movement cutting across all the classes, the NAP [National Awami Party] in Balochistan is a mere assortment of Baloch and Brohi tribal leaders. On the lingual basis Brohis have as much in common with the Balochis as Tamils have with Pashtuns”, Feroz Ahmad commented in 1999\(^6\).

On the other hand, a new Baloch nationalism has emerged with the emancipation of the Baloch middle class and intelligentsia\(^7\). These people were often educated outside the province, where they acquired modern

---

\(^1\) Tribal leaders
\(^2\) Pakistan: the Worsening Conflict in Balochistan, International Crisis Group, Asia Report no.119, 14 settembre 2006, p. 23
\(^3\) Ibidem, p. 10
\(^5\) F. GRARE, Balochistan. The state versus the Nation, The Carnegie Papers, South Asia, April 2013, p. 8
\(^7\) M.I. LAIF, M.A. HAMZA, (2000), p. 67
ideas but also developed a sense of belonging to the homeland. They wanted to bring these ideas back home but found themselves excluded from high positions in administration or in the army, which they deserved due to their education.

Gradually, the relatively unified middle class took command over the nationalist movement in what is considered a process of its ‘detribalization’. One of the better known leaders of the movement, Dr. Allah Nazar Baloch, says: “I agree that tribal system has lost its significance in today’s world. The current tribal system is not the one our ancestors practiced”⁸. The middle-class is also much less prone to make separate agreements with the government (as it would happen frequently with the sardars).

Traditionally restless tribal areas in the North-East of the province were heavily struck at the beginning of the conflict so that the flashpoints moved towards the urban centers in the South-West, where the middle classes were ready to embrace insurgent ideas⁹. The profile of the militant has changed as well: he has become modern, tribal-free and younger: the majority is probably under 30. They come from the cities like Kech, Panjgur, Gwadar, Quetta, Khudzdar, Turbat, Kharan, Lasbela or even Karachi. This is where the Frontier Corps concentrate their forces¹⁰. Islamabad, by targeting the middle class and the youth, destroys human potential which is vital for the development of the Baloch society and the province as a whole. Young educated people are not only marginalized by the federal policies but also heavily radicalized and may spend their best years in mountains with kalashnikovs.

**Toward radicalization?**

Motivation and goals have changed as well. People are desperate and have lost confidence in the sense of political solutions. Continuing disappointments, such as lacking power devolution, extractive policy, military pressure and all kinds of abuse, lead to statements like: “When nobody wants to hear our voice, we’re forced to make them hear it through violence” or “the young people have taken up the arms; they are fighting for their rights. They think they can’t get through a political struggle. If this still continues, if we can’t get our rights through political means, we too will take up the gun […] we are now tired. This is our last struggle”¹¹.

Some leaders set their sights on independence and have very precise

---

⁹ F. GRARE, (2013), p. 9
¹⁰ Ibidem
¹¹ Pakistan: the Worsening..., cit, p. 12
political plans. A prominent political activist of the Baloch Republican Party’s Women’s Wing, Banuk Hooran Baloch, delineates exact borders of the desired state: “we demand independence for greater Balochistan which includes Rajanpur, Dera Ghazi Khan (currently in Punjab), Jacobabad, Karachi (currently in Sindh) and Iranian occupied Balochistan and our struggle will continue until we free greater Balochistan”.

Certainly, these are not the mainstreaming voices, but the fact that they appear in a public debate proves that there are serious radicalization flashpoints within society.

The escalation of the attacks against the pipelines and the episodes of violence can be observed since 2002. Initially, the armed group would organize attacks against everything that symbolized the ‘colonial’ state’s policy, like pipelines, railway, electricity network or military cantonment, provoking heavy retaliations. The salient feature of these actions was that they were not causing many casualties, at least not among civilians. If the victims were usually Punjab, it could be explained by the ethnic composition of the military forces assigned to quell the insurrection. However, with time and with the increase in turmoil, the militants started to target also Punjabi civilians: teachers, policemen, employees working on pipelines or in Gwadar, and even Chinese engineers engaged in projects sponsored by China. For instance, in 2004 a car bomb killed three Chinese engineers and wounded 9 en route to Gwadar.

Threatening and physically eliminating Punjabi employees, both from public administration or private companies, is supposed to have a symbolic meaning of fighting the Punjabi domination over the province. Instead, it has a critical impact on the Baloch society which is an indirect victim of this practice: Balochistan cannot provide its own staff for schools and other public structure and has to rely on better qualified specialists from Punjabi. Targeting Punjabis discourage them to come to work in Balochistan. If that is a goal of the militants in order to counter migration from other provinces, it should be also considered that encouraging ethnic hate may undermine social relations for decades.

Baloch come out of shadow

14 J.R. MURTHA, The strategic Importance of Balochistan, thesis for the Naval Postgraduate School of Monterey, California, June 2011, p. 49
15 C.C. FAIR, Balochistan, US House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, 8 February 2012, p. 8
Islamabad has always tried to divert attention from the conflict and to stifle the stream of news from the province. The policy of misinformation caused within years a surprising unawareness of what was actually going on there. The government would downplay the scale of unrest, as an army spokesman said: “It is not an insurgency...The Baloch militants are employed people [mercenaries]. There is no [nationalist or other ideological] motivation”\(^\text{16}\). Thus, many Pakistanis, especially the left, were convinced by the official version promoted by Islamabad.

Gradually, this wall of silence started to erode and in spite of many risks, influx of information has been intensifying. Extremely poor conditions of the education and communication infrastructures have not impeded Baloch society to become very active even on international forums. Nowadays, the situation in Balochistan can be relatively easily monitored but impartiality and plausibility of the information remain to be verified.

There are numerous websites and blogs, often run by a Baloch diaspora in different parts of the world, from Sweden to Canada. They have different viewpoints but all declare to be impartial and to “raise awareness on an international level and report the atrocities against Baloch people[...]”\(^\text{17}\).

Initiatives on a bigger scale have been undertaken, too. Baloch would resort to the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization\(^\text{18}\) and the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva. Appeals have been also made to the USA for interrupting its military assistance to Pakistan and for American intervention.

**Laic nationalists**

The completely secular character of this sites and initiatives is a salient feature. Defence of the human rights and democracy in a quite Western way is in the first place, often colorized by the nationalism, moderate or radical. The availability of the English version, the inspiration of the UN Declarations of Human Rights, the concept of nation and other values commonly shared in the Western world, are explicit. They lack references to the global jihad or any kind of anti-Western solidarity of the Muslim world. Even the radical site Baluch Sarmachar, with its war cry:

---


\(^{17}\) balochwarna.com/xcenter/about/us/about-balochwarna/1,1.html, 15.02.2013

\(^{18}\) http://www.unpo.org/article/15484
“Long live free and united Balochistan, Struggle and Victory”, invokes just freedom. If we type in its search engine words like ‘Allah’, the results refer to Dr. Allah Nazar Baloch, “most popular middle-class leader” and to Dera Allah Yar area of Jaffarabad district. If we do the same thing with the word ‘jihad’ the first result is an article The enemies of civilized world announced Jihad against Baloch Nation, and others in this vein19.

In the case of Balochistan, the religious factor does not count because the conflicting sides are both Sunni. If religion can be promoted to a national/ethnic unity factor even in traditionally tolerant societies, in Baloch case it is less probable because it is a persecutor, the state, who uses religion as a form of oppression. In a logical way, therefore, Baloch, whose culture was never particularly religious, do not feel like invoking Islam in their struggle.

Social mobilization

Another peculiarity is that the repression can indirectly encourage a social mobilization, a raise of awareness of the identity, and a new-gained confidence to defend one's rights. Certainly, this could be a very tricky path since the collusion with extremist religious movements or xenophobic forms of the nationalism is easy. As mentioned before, the former is less probable given the alliance of conservative Islamist and the state. The latter, however, has already come true in many cases. An ethnic tincture that appears in some aspects of the militancy is a proof of this worrying process. It is important to remember that probably not all the blogs written by the well-educated young people from London are read on regular basis by the poorly educated people in Baloch mud houses. Nonetheless, the injustice and violence affecting all Baloch every day, push them to search for solidarity within their community and to go on the streets. Consequently, information and ideas go around.

The parties like Baloch Republican Party, Baloch Youth Wing, Baloch National Movement and other new and traditional organizations, call for strikes, hunger strikes or demonstrations, and achieve actual results. They appeal in the first place for an end to abductions and extrajudicial killings, which are particularly painful for the community. They are addressed primarily to the UN, like the one organized by the Voice of Baloch Missing People on the Eid Day in Quetta (August 2013) with people carrying large photos of their abducted relatives20. During these events, clashes with the police take place frequently.

19 sarmachar baluchsarmachar.wordpress.com/
20 Ibidem
Women step up for their rights

The presence of women at demonstrations is another feature worth being raised. Since the first to be abducted or to be killed are men, the ones who mourn and protest are in the majority of cases mothers, wives, sisters. Although Baloch tradition is much less bound by Islamic laws, it remains deeply patriarchal and gender restrictive. Baloch women have never had a decisive role in society and would spend most of their time at home looking after family. Nevertheless, the unrest, military operations and abductions have had a dramatic impact on the traditional social structure. Men ‘disappear’ and the trauma caused by this change the ingrained social code. Frequently, women are the only ones left to maintain broken families. By going to work and interacting with the authorities when trying to get information about the missing, they emancipate themselves. This is a common phenomenon for repressed and warring societies, as a World Bank study states: “Conflicts create households headed by widows who can be especially vulnerable to inter-generational poverty. Second-round impact can provide opportunities for women in work and politics triggered by the absence of men”21.

There are a lot of stories of women who have moved into action, like Zarina Baloch, who after the forced disappearance of her cousin, a political activist, and after finding him dead two years later, started to take part in rallies on a regular basis: “I was in Karachi when I heard the news that the mutilated body has been found in Turbat. I don’t have words. What can I do? I heard there is a protest by BHRO [Baloch Human Rights Organization] the next day, so I have to join that protest and I joined. I even spoke to many news channels and told them that my brother has been killed. I got his mutilated body”22.

Banuk Hooran Baloch is the organizer of the Women’s Wing of Baloch Republican Party. According to her, women are obliged to: “fight for liberation shoulder-to-shoulder with Baloch brothers because if we [the Baloch women] remain ignorant about the struggle and don’t play our role today then the history will never forgive us”23. Not only do women demonstrate holding photos of ‘Baloch martyrs’, but they even reach

---


23 baluchsarmachar.wordpress.com/2012/08/04/i-joined-politics-to-struggle-for-thr-liberation-of-my-nation-banuk-hooran-baloch/, 04.08.2012
important positions. As Karima Baloch, about 30-years-old vice-chair of the Baloch Students Organization, says: “And that’s what’s so striking. In a region where women are for the most part neither seen nor heard, they are now not just silent supporters of the separatist movement: they’ve become its leaders”24. She is paying a high price though, since, having been tried in absentia for sedition and defiling Pakistani flag for three years, she has been living hiding. Banuk Hooran Baloch mentions 200 women abducted and detained, like Hanifa Bugti or Zarina Marri, a young school teacher, abducted in 2005 and allegedly kept in a Karachi cell, tortured and forced to work as sex slave25.

It is not ascertained whether there are women among the guerrillas in the mountains, but it does not seem as unimaginable as it could have some time ago in the segregated society of Balochistan. Dr. Allah Nazar Baloch, for instance, acknowledges and even wishes for women taking up arms: “I appeal to my sisters. If in Palestine, Leila Khaled can pick up arms then can’t my sisters do the same? [...] They should play their role because this is a demand of the times. History is not written just for men. Both men and women make up the history of any nation”26. However, these seemingly ground breaking words raise concern that the women’s will to fight could be abused in order for them to become obedient kamikaze. We can only hope that these declarations may really trigger a change.

Certainly, it is difficult to see any positive aspects in protracting bloodshed, extreme poverty, everyday terror, broken families. Emancipation should not come at price of such suffering, but the sad fact is that sometimes it does. Women and girls are the most vulnerable in war’s terrifying consequences but it is also the war that, by striking society as a whole, transforms deeply its structure and rearranges roles. When men, fathers, husbands, leaders go missing, who is left has to mobilize, both because of the desperation and rage, and because of a simple need to survive. Here’s why Naela Quadri, in exile in Afghanistan since 2010 where she heads the World Baloch Women's Forum, says: “Here this grand involvement of women in nationalist movement means a lot. It means many chains of patriarchy, breaking many chains of slavery. It’s not just slavery from Pakistan. Slavery from patriarchal chains also”27. However, the way

---

27 Ibidem
ahead is still long and tortuous.

The separation from Pakistan has been brought into public debate. The continuing violence and destruction of the social structures push people to harden their position without taking into account the realistic capacities and the actual will of Baloch to organize in the state of Balochistan. What people really want counts less and less, while events push them toward radicalization.

Bibliography


Fair C.C., *Balochistan*, US House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, 8 February 2012


Gall C., “In remote Pakistan, a civil war festers”, in *The New York Times*, 2 April 2006

Grare F., *Balochistan. The state versus the Nation*, The Carnegie Papers, South Asia, April 2013

Harrisson, S.S., “Nightmare in Balochistan”, *Foreign Policy*, no. 32, Autumn 1978


Muller C., Vothknecht M., *Group violence, Ethnic Diversity and Citizen Participation: Evidence from Indonesia*, Aix Marseille School of Economics,

---

28 F. GRARE, (2013), p. 23
February 2012
Murtha J.R., *The strategic Importance of Balochistan*, thesis for the Naval Postgraduate School of Monterey, California, June 2011
Piacentini Fioriani V.F., *Pakistan, le condizioni di sicurezza e gli scenari futuri* Research of the Military Center of Strategic Studies, 2010
*The state of sectarianism in Pakistan*, International Crisis Group, Asia Report no. 95, 18 April 2005

**Online sources**

www.baluchsarmachar.wordpress.com/
www.balochwarna.com/index.php
www.balochyouthwing.com/
www.bbc.co.uk/
www.bygwaah.com/
www.dawn.com
www.globalsecurity.org
hdr.undp.org/en/media/HDR2013_EN_Statistics.pdf, Key to HDI countries and ranks, Human Development Report 2013,
www.intellibriefs.blogspot.com, T. Saeedi, *‘Pakistan: Unveiling the Mystery of Balochistan Insurgency’* Intellibrief, 01.03.2005
www.pakistani.org/pakistan/constitution/part5.ch3.html
www.southasiaanalysis.org/node/1126, B. Raman, Pakistan: Shia Anger Againsy Kayani
www.thebalochistanpoint.com/
www.thebaluch.com/documents/HRCP%20FF%20KECH.doc, 24-29.04.2009,
Turbat Fact Finding Report
www.thenews.com/pk
www.unpo.org/article/15484, 11.02.2013