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# OPINION

## **The Tentacles of Violence: The Baloch Militancy and its Dire Consequences for Pakistan**

**Josh Bowes\***



Pakistan has seen no shortage of conflict in 2023 amid growing socio-political polarization across the country. On 5 August,<sup>1</sup> ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan was arrested and given a 3-year prison sentence on corruption charges. The sentence comes a year after Khan was ousted from power following a no-confidence vote, a move which was allegedly backed by the United States Department of State<sup>2</sup>.

Aside from the ongoing political dispute in Islamabad, Pakistan's southwestern province of Balochistan has seen an escalation in violence. The insurgent separatist Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) claimed responsibility for an attack

on a convoy of Chinese engineers on 13 August 2023,<sup>3</sup> near the city of Gwadar. Two of the BLA assailants were killed by security forces with no casualties reported on the side of the Chinese personnel. The attack on the convoy is not the first time that Baloch separatists have targeted Chinese-related development operations. China is building a seaport in Gwadar as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The violence is largely attributed<sup>4</sup> to China's aim to link its Xinjiang province to the Arabian Sea by way of railroads and bridges as part of CPEC. Baloch rebels like the BLA, who seek to become independent from Pakistan entirely,<sup>5</sup> have reacted strongly to Chinese investment in the

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province. China vehemently condemned the attack<sup>6</sup> on its workers and warned Pakistan to prevent further escalation. Growing militancy in Balochistan at the hands of the BLA and other groups has made Pakistan's largest province an increasingly insecure region that teeters on the brink of collapse.

Not only does the threat of militancy in Balochistan affect Pakistan's relationship with China, who is investing \$62 billion into CPEC<sup>7</sup>, heightened insurgency and violence in the province also poses a continued threat of conflict for women and girls. Purportedly, at the hands of Pakistani security forces, thousands of Balochs have gone missing in the province<sup>8</sup>, which has left many mothers and wives polarized in society and suffering from extreme mental trauma.<sup>9</sup> In addition to these enforced disappearances, Balochistan's close proximity to Afghanistan makes Baloch women and children increasingly susceptible to the purview of the Taliban and the Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP), the Pakistani faction of the Taliban that has increasingly encroached into Balochistan.<sup>10</sup> The ongoing violence in Balochistan is exacerbated by the province's porous border with Afghanistan, allowing for violent actors to move resources to and fro, making it easier for enforced

disappearances and violent attacks to go unchallenged.

Continued militancy and terrorism operations in Balochistan not only threaten the livelihood of society's most vulnerable people, but also the dignity of free and fair elections. The conflict is interlinked with Pakistan's fragmented politics, amid an already fractious political scene in Islamabad. On 19 September 2023,<sup>11</sup> the central leader of the Awami National Party (ANP), Advocate Arbab Ghulam Kasi, was found dead in an abandoned area outside of Balochistan's capital, Quetta. The ANP's anti-militant stance makes Kasi's killing likely attributable to a militant or terror cell. In 2013,<sup>12</sup> the TTP carried out an attack on ANP leaders during an election campaign in response to a perceived crackdown on extremism. Seemingly, Baloch separatists, likely supported by the TTP in some fashion, have sought to prevent cross-border trade with Iran.<sup>13</sup> Many Baloch separatists supported by the BLA represent either the Balochistan National Party (BNP) or Haq Do Tehreek, another political party, who together claim that there is a 'conspiracy'<sup>14</sup> against the people of Balochistan.

The complicated socio-political conflict in Pakistan's largest province appears to be out of reach for the Pakistani central government, as

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security forces continue to face bombings and suicide attacks. One attack on 24 June 2023,<sup>15</sup> carried out by a female suicide bomber, killed one and injured several more. However, Balochistan's importance stretches far beyond just Pakistan's domestic power. The multitude of violent actors that aim to control the Baloch region appear to do so not just for sovereignty but also for its natural resources. The region is massively important to the energy sector due to its naturally-occurring mineral supply. There are large amounts of gold, copper, quartzite, marble, limestone, barite and sulphur<sup>16</sup> in the Baloch mountain ranges, in addition to expansive oil reserves. With an estimated value at over \$1 trillion, control over Pakistan's largest province has become the top priority for terror cells and violent political groups alike. As Islamabad struggles to contain the violence in the midst of political furor in the central government, a larger, more wild conflict could break out. Perceived political alignment between the BLA and the TTP will only fuel violence in the Baloch region, pitting Pakistan in an increasingly tumultuous position between lawlessness and authoritative control.

The unrelenting conflict in Balochistan is not exclusive to within the province's borders, or even

Pakistan itself. Human rights activist Karima Baloch, who was living in exile in Canada, was found dead in Toronto in 2020<sup>17</sup> after she was charged with terrorism<sup>18</sup> by the Pakistani state. The aura of mystery surrounding Baloch's death is only compounded by the Canadian government's lack of action in her alleged murder. Nearly three years after Baloch's death, there are still no concrete answers to explain what happened. It may not be unreasonable to assume that Pakistani authorities are responsible for Baloch's sudden death in light of the disappearances of thousands of activists and separatists in Balochistan. If this is the case, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's silence on the matter speaks volumes and hints at a much deeper cross-border Canada-Pakistan dispute.

Without causing more chaos, it is important for the Pakistani government to exact its rule over Balochistan, but to such a degree that Islamabad is also held accountable for its presumed involvement in the enforced disappearances of Baloch activists and dissidents. To stamp out terror operations in the province, the governments of South Asia must coordinate an effort to prevent a larger scale conflict from erupting. International fora must pay closer attention to Balochistan's ongoing

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violence in order to develop a cohesive strategy in eradicating violent insurgents and militants. The vicious and intemperate fighting in

Balochistan will explode into a transnational dissent if not addressed rapidly, threatening the lives of thousands. ■

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