

Baluchis

Profile

The Baluchis are the indigenous peoples of Baluchistan, which is split between the Pakistani province of Baluchistan and Iranian Baluchistan. The majority of the Baluch people reside in the Baluchistan province of Pakistan. Baluchistan is the largest of all provinces of modern-day Pakistan, making up nearly two-fifths of the entire country. The enormity of its size, contrasts strikingly with its low percentage of population and its economic destitution, particularly in comparison to Punjabis, Sindhis and Pathans.

According to the most recent population census held in 1998, the total population of Baluchistan consisted of 6.5 million out of the total Pakistani population of 131 million. In 2006 the population of Baluchis in Pakistan was estimated as 8.2 million. The Baluch population thus approximates to around 5 per cent of the total population of the country. Baluch nationalists claim that deliberate government policies have resulted in underestimation of the numbers of indigenous peoples. It is also the case that indigenous Baluchis have been swamped by 'outsiders', even within their own homelands.

The socio-economic conditions of the Baluchis are abysmal, with over 50 per cent living below the poverty line. Baluchis do not form a homogeneous group, branching out as the Makrani or western Baluchis in Pakistan and south-western Afghanistan, the Sulemani or eastern Baluchis in Iran, and the Brahuis of the central Kalat plateau of Pakistani Baluchistan. The latter speak the Brahui language, which, though not related to Baluchi, has certain resonances with that language. Baluchis are largely Sunni Muslims, followers of the Hanafi school.

Historical context

Although there is considerable controversy surrounding their origins, according to popular Baluchi legends they migrated northward from Aleppo (in modern Syria) for pastureland and fresh water during the Arab conquests of the ninth century, travelling along the southern shores of the Caspian Sea and subsequently settling in what is now Iranian and Pakistani Baluchistan by the fourteenth century.

Baluchi nationalists point to their largely independent history over several centuries. Afghans, Persians and Sikhs all made repeated but unsuccessful attempts to establish complete control over Baluchistan. The British gained control over a considerable proportion of the region during the nineteenth century, at first through political agreements and subsidies negotiated with Baluchi leaders, and by the 1870s through direct territorial control or influence over the princely states. Even then, Baluchis enjoyed considerable autonomy. Their customary 'tribal' law, for instance, was retained and enforced by 'tribal councils' under the authority of the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR).

Khanate of Kalat and Baluchi nationalism

Baluchis have experienced considerable internal strife and bitter feuds, and have historically been unable

to present a united political front. One key exception was in the eighteenth century, when successive rulers of the Baluchi principality of Kalat forged political unity throughout most of the Baluchi area. Since that period the Khanate of Kalat has remained a symbol of Baluchi nationalism. Indeed, prior to the independence of India there was a serious possibility that Baluchis would be accorded self-rule under the inspirational leader of the Khan of Kalat. Accordingly, an agreement was reached between the British and Pakistan governments on 4 August 1947 to recognize the status of Kalat as a free and independent state. Eleven days later, the Khan of Kalat declared the independence of Kalat, a decision endorsed by the Kalat Assembly. While the newly formed government of Pakistan immediately repudiated the declaration of independence, amalgamation with Pakistan or the dismemberment of Kalat was unacceptable to the Khan.

Ignoring these political aspirations, the Pakistan authorities relied heavily on the decision of Baluchi leaders in Quetta on 29 June 1947 to merge with Pakistan, deliberately concealing the fact that these leaders had been appointed by the British, and their assembly's decision related to the small tract of land known as British Baluchistan. Baluchi rulers remained unhappy with Pakistan's interference in what they regarded as their domestic affairs, and they continued to be rebellious. Despite constant threats of coercion, and actual use of force, only in 1955 did the rulers of these independent territories formally agree to cede their states. The element of a probable claim of secession on the part of Khan of Kalat was used as a major issue, which led to the abrogation of Pakistan's first constitution in October 1958, the arrest of the Khan, and the promulgation of martial law.

Rebellion against the government of Pakistan

Recent Baluchi history in Pakistan is marked by the major rebellion of 1973-7 against the government of Pakistan. This followed increasing centralization of power, despite numerous assurances of devolution set out in the new Pakistani Constitution of 1973, drafted following the secession of East Pakistan. The new constitution contained numerous guarantees of the rights of ethnic minorities, reaffirming their separate legal status and right to their own language and culture. The government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, however, disregarded these guarantees, and the provinces became increasingly subordinate to central authority. The crisis erupted when Bhutto dismissed the coalition government of Baluchistan in 1973 on the grounds of its alleged encouragement of a secessionist movement, smuggling and opposition to modernization. Opposition leaders were arrested and jailed, and in 1976 the *sardari* 'tribal chief' system was abolished. Meanwhile the war had escalated; by 1974 it was reported that as many as 55,000 Baluchis were fighting some 70,000 government troops. It is estimated that over 5,000 insurgents and 3,000 government troops were killed, and large quantities of livestock were destroyed, while the interruption of food supplies to civilians in insurgent-controlled areas caused great suffering. Some Baluchi rebels surrendered under a general amnesty; others fled to Afghanistan, where they were housed in government camps. The insurgency continued fitfully until the fall of the Bhutto government in 1977 and the subsequent release of jailed leaders of the region.

Demand for political and economic autonomy

Throughout the military rule of General Zia (1977-88) and the governments of Benazir Bhutto (1988-90, 1993-6) and Nawaz Sharif (1990-3, 1997-9), Baluchi demands centred around political and economic autonomy. They demanded a readjustment of power, with the federal government in control of only defence and foreign affairs, and the province having unfettered authority over provincial matters. The continuing denials of provincial autonomy and the enforcement of military rule in October 1999 resulted in armed insurrection led by the Bugti and Marri tribes. Considerable violence erupted after the disclosure of the rape of Dr Shazia Khalid in Sui in January 2005. Since that period the unrestrained use of force by the Frontier Core and the military has resulted in significant bloodshed, extra-judicial killings, torture and arbitrary arrests.

Current issues

Grievances harboured by the Baluch stem from their economic deprivations. Baluchistan has economic resources which the successive federal governments have exploited without either due acknowledgement of Baluchistan's contribution to the national economy or recompense in monetary or financial measures. Natural gas deposits were found in the Sui area in 1953 and in Pirkoh in 1982. The natural gas deposits of Baluchistan cater in a very large measure to the running of industries, factories, businesses and domestic usage in all of the provinces of Pakistan. The Baluch nationalists claim that the royalties received from these projects are next to negligible. In common with other indigenous peoples, the Baluch also feel that their land and territory have been taken over by outsiders who are politically and economically more powerful. The federal government under President Pervez Musharraf has put forward plans to construct a deep sea port at Gwadar and establish road links with Afghanistan and Central Asia. The federal government's claim that these developments will bring greater prosperity to the Baluchis are refuted by the Baluch tribal leaders who consider this as new variant of economic and political exploitation.

In order to enquire into the grievances and claims advanced by Baluch leaders, the former Prime Minister Chaudhary Shujaat Hussain on 23 September 2004 set up a special Parliamentary Committee (unanimously approved by both Houses of Parliament). The committee, which was divided into two sub-committees, presented a number of recommendations in March 2005, including assurances by the federal government that all arrears on gas royalties will be paid; greater investment to alleviate unemployment, poverty and underdevelopment in the province; the withdrawal of Frontier Constabulary from the interior of Baluchistan; and the shifting of the head office of the Gwadar Port Authority (GPA) from Karachi to Gwadar. None of these recommendations have been taken further by the federal government - instead, reliance has been placed on coercive means, such as arrests and detentions of dissident Baluchi nationalists.

Impact of the 'war on terror'

The heavy-handed tactics currently being deployed by the Musharraf government under the pretext of the 'war on terror' has resulted in enormous human suffering Baluchistan and the Tribal belt surrounding the province. Since 17 December 2005, the Pakistan military has launched full-fledged operations in Kohlu and Dera Bugti. The military has reportedly been using jet fighters and helicopter gunships in its operations to attack the suspected hideouts of combatant Marri and Bugti tribesmen in Kolhu and Dera Bugti respectively. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), as many as 53 people were killed and 132 injured in military operations in Dera Bugti in the period from last week of December 2005 till 8 January 2006. Eighteen people, including 12 suspected members of the Balochi armed opposition groups and six security personnel, reportedly were killed during 11-13 January 2006. There were also reports of extra-judicial killings of the detainees by the law enforcement agencies. The military government claims that Baluch and Pakhtun tribesmen are harbouring Al Qaeda militants in the Tribal areas of south Waziristan, a claim vigorously denied by the tribespeople.