

Balochistan: Development that breeds rebellion

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On May 2, 2004, the Balochistan Liberation Front, a militant group operating along the southern belt in Balochistan, set off a bomb in the southern port city of Gwadar. Three Chinese engineers were killed, and an additional nine people were injured. It was one of the first in a series of attacks carried out by a militant group in this fifth round of the separatist insurgency: on checkpoints run by the paramilitary Frontier Corps, gas pipelines in Dera Bugti, and coast guards along Gwadar Port.

Earlier this week — or exactly one decade, and one month after the attack in Gwadar — Finance Minister Ishaq Dar announced this government's Rs4 trillion 2014-2015 budget in the parliament. The following day, most newspapers declared that the budget provided "relief for the rich, peanuts for the poor." Its "pro-business agenda" had ensured "major relief for industry" through a growth-centered, infrastructure-focused development policy, with only "some relief for the common man."

Fifteen hundred kilometres away from the parliament where Dar made his announcement, a young man by the name of Lateef Johar was sitting in front of the Karachi Press Club starving himself to death. He continues to sit there, having lost more than 25 kilos, demanding the immediate release of his friend and comrade Zahid Baloch. Lateef says Zahid was picked up by the Pakistani security forces because he was the secretary-general of the Balochistan Student Organisation-Azaad, a group that was banned one month before the 2013 Pakistani elections that brought Dar's government into power.

Documents compiled by the BSO-Azaad indicate that their members are hunted down by the Pakistani security forces — 43 have turned up dead, and an additional 11 members remain missing (the security forces, who have subsequently been contacted by this writer, have refused to meet for an interview).

In Pakistan (and elsewhere), knowledge and analysis is becoming increasingly fragmented. That means there is an unwillingness to piece together disparate bits of information to paint a larger picture. Part of this stems from fear: It can be dangerous to recognise patterns that reveal a more accurate state of affairs. But part of this finds its roots in something far more insidious: A habit of seeing things separately, in bits and pieces, because doing this is increasingly considered more balanced, neutral and accurate. Knowledge is reduced to that which is measurable and observable, and as a result, the larger patterns that perpetuate the inequality and violence that keeps places like Balochistan marginalised remain unaddressed.

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The ongoing insurgency in Balochistan cannot be reduced to frustrations by its 6-million strong population with the growth and development policies of the Pakistani state. Dar's budget can in no way solely be critiqued from the point of view of the Baloch (it is "anti-poor", as one article claimed,

in many other ways as well). And the ongoing hunger strike in front of the Karachi Press Club, as well as the continued abduction, torture and killings of the Baloch, reflects a critique and a conflict that is far more widespread than the feeling that the fruits of economic growth seem to consistently pass by Balochistan. But the juxtaposition of these three, disparate events allows us to explore a relationship that has largely remained untouched by the debate in the public sphere, and the vast majority of academics: that between dominant notions of development and the ongoing insurgency.

A dominant chunk of the government's Rs1.3 trillion development budget will be invested in infrastructure projects over the next year. An additional Rs700 billion will be eaten up by the Pakistani security forces (Rs863 billion if one includes retirement funds for army officials). And, according to budget documents, Rs113 billion will be used on 74 projects to build roads and highways for a North-South economic corridor that aims to link Gwadar Port with the Khunjerab Pass, or China's south-western Xinjiang province, in the north. The Chinese and Pakistanis are planning to resuscitate the old Silk Road so that China's land-locked, south-western provinces can gain access to the trade made possible via Pakistan's longest coastline. And Pakistan hopes that China's interest will spark economic growth within its own economy.

The result on the ground in Balochistan is a people who experience a state far more interested in large-scale infrastructure projects aimed at stimulating national growth, than fates of those who live in these areas through the construction of, e.g. smaller roads, schools, and hospitals. The BLF attack on the three Chinese engineers back in 2004 was a highly symbolic attack: Fishermen were being displaced, migrants from other provinces and countries were entering, and enormous amounts of wealth was being amassed, but very little trickled down to those who lived around Gwadar.

Ironically, or perhaps tellingly, the other end of the soon-to-be resuscitated Silk Road faces a similar challenge: Uighur rebels say the Chinese state is forcibly displacing its people in and around the ancient Silk Road city of Kashgar to make way for growth. Both China and Pakistan had been saying that the fruits of growth and development would accrue to the people, but saw very little improvement in their lives.

Scathing critiques of the Pakistani state's growth-centered development policy has been one of the key arguments used by separatists to mobilise young men like Lateef and Zahid to call for the separation of Balochistan. To shut their criticism down, and to protect the state-run infrastructure projects, the security forces have deployed massive amounts of troops in Balochistan (it was Musharraf who completed the construction of Gwadar Port and initiated a wide array of major infrastructure projects — from national highways to dams to the port itself. And Musharraf who oversaw the killing of Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti and the spark that officially kicked off this round of the insurgency).

It is no wonder that a Baloch living in Gwadar, next to the multi-million rupee Mirani Dam in Turbat, or the national highway between Karachi and Gwadar, believes that the Pakistani state is ready to spend billions on projects that promote its own economic growth, and only a pittance on developments for the people. From the gas fields of Dera Bugti that have kept Pakistani stoves running since the 1950s to the port that will soon become one of the biggest drivers of regional and Pakistani trade, dominant, growth-centered notions of development will continue to fuel the insurgency and war that we continue to ignore in southern Pakistan.

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P.S.

* The News on Sunday, June 8, 2014:

<http://tns.thenews.com.pk/development-breeds-rebellion-in-balochistan/#.U5WRixZ5NJQ>

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