

Pakistan's Hazaras targeted by campaign of ethnic-communal killings

A Pakistani correspondent
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More than twenty Hazaras were killed and some thirty others wounded in a series of ambushes last month in Quetta, the capital of Pakistan's Balochistan province. Since 1998, 700 Hazaras and some 300 other members of Pakistan's Shia minority have died in Balochistan as a result of targeted ethnic-communal killings.

Life in Quetta, like all of northern and western Pakistan, has been severely disrupted by the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan.

Pakistan's poorest province, Balochistan has also been convulsed since 2004 by a Baloch nationalist-separatist insurgency and a brutal Pakistani military-led counterinsurgency campaign that has involved disappearances, torture and summary executions.

No organization has claimed responsibility for last month's killings.

In the past, several Sunni fundamentalist organizations, including the Lashkar-e-Jangvi and the Sepah-e-Sahaba, have boasted of targeting the Hazaras, a Shia group that originates from Afghanistan and who speak Farsi (Persian).

The killings come at a time when Pakistan security forces are facing widespread public criticism for the brutal and illegal methods they have used in combatting the Baloch insurgency. Faced with incontrovertible evidence that security forces have been illegally disappearing civilians, including young boys, Pakistan's Supreme Court has issued a series of orders for the authorities to explain their whereabouts.

Not only do the killings of the Hazaras turn attention from the crimes of the security forces; they are serving as a pretext to push for a further militarization of Balochistan.

Although Balochistan, with a population of just 10 million, is Pakistan's smallest and poorest province, it is highly important from an economic and geopolitical standpoint. It is rich in minerals and natural gas and

borders both Afghanistan and Iran. It is the site of the Chinese-built Gwadar port facility, which could provide Beijing with an Arabian Sea naval base and serve as the starting point for a land route for shipping oil and natural gas from the Middle East to China, thereby largely bypassing the US-dominated Indian Ocean.

Last month's targeted killings of Hazaras provoked widespread protests in Quetta, where half a million Hazaras live, elsewhere in Pakistan, and internationally.

On Saturday, April 14, one day after a major protest that saw Quetta effectively shut down for the day, nine more Hazaras were killed in three separate attacks.

Over the past decade, the target killings of Hazaras have resulted in virtually no arrests, let alone convictions.

The indifference of the Pakistani establishment to the plight of the Hazaras was exemplified by statements made by Balochistan Chief Minister and Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader Nawab Aslam Raisani last year after 40 Hazaras were killed in Mastung. Raisani, who hails from Mastung, dismissed the ethno-communal killings as "no big deal" and said that he would send "a truckload of tissue papers" to the families of the dead.

Unable to provide a progressive solution to mass poverty and economic backwardness, the rival factions of the Pakistani bourgeoisie have long stoked religious-sectarian and ethnic conflict as a means of dividing the working class and toilers and rallying support for their internecine struggles for pelf and privilege.

This includes the Balochi nationalists and separatists, who seek to exploit the genuine grievances of the Balochi people over endemic poverty and state indifference and repression, to advance the interests of the traditional sardars (tribal leaders/landowners) and other privileged layers. The reactionary orientation of the Balochi separatist organizations is exemplified by the campaign of ethnic killings they have carried out against Pashtun workers and other "outsiders" and by their appeals to

Washington and other imperialist powers for support.

The April 13 protests were supported by many mainstream parties and backed by the Majlis-e-Wahdat-ul-Muslamin or MWM, a Shia organization. Especially prominent was the Hazara Democratic Party (HDP).

Both the MWM and HDP have raised the call for the imposition of Governor's Rule, a form of emergency government that entails the dissolution of the provincial assembly and the elected ministry and a strengthening of the power of the executive. Under Governor's Rule, the security forces and military have frequently been given even freer rein to run roughshod over basic rights and judicial norms.

Formed in 2003, the ethically based HDP describes itself as a secular, social-democratic party.

Faced with the indifference of the government and likely complicity of sections of the military-security apparatus in the killings of the Hazaras, the HDP is urging Hazaras to turn to the Western powers and the United Nations for support, including pressing them to invoke the UN "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide."

This is a reactionary trap.

The western powers have long been "intervening" in South Asia to the detriment of its peoples and bear much of the responsibility for the Hazaras' current plight. As a stratagem of colonial rule, Britain set the people of South Asia against each other. Then, in connivance with the aspiring national bourgeoisies of India and Pakistan, it partitioned the subcontinent, thereby institutionalizing the communal conflict and giving birth to a nation-state system that frustrates rational economic development and facilitates imperialist domination.

The United States has supported a succession of military dictatorships in Pakistan—including that of General Zia-ul-Haq, which openly promoted Sunni fundamentalism. It has been waging war in Afghanistan, so as to pursue its predatory geopolitical interests, directly for more than a decade and through proxies for much of the preceding quarter century.

Moreover, Washington, along with Israel, Saudi Arabia and its major European allies, is mounting a destabilization campaign against Iran—punishing sanctions, threats of military strikes, provocative naval deployments and war preparations—that threatens to plunge the entire region into war.

As for the UN, it has repeatedly served as a stalking horse for imperialist intervention. Selectively, the US and the EU powers seize on the repressive actions of despotic

regimes and invoke the "right of nations to self-determination" to justify criminal wars of interventions and regime change, while ignoring, covering up, and frequently encouraging the bloody crimes perpetrated by their "Third World" allies

That the HDP is deliberately seeking to curry favour with the imperialist powers is underscored by its attitudes to Iran and the Afghan war. While the HDP denounces Iran for "meddling" in the affairs of other countries, it supports the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. The HDP is critical of Hamid Karzai not because he is a corrupt stooge of the US and dependent on NATO to protect him from the wrath of his people; but only because his government has failed to protect the Afghan Hazaras from "Pashtun aggression."

The HDP justifies its support for the US on the grounds that when the Sunni fundamentalist Taliban ruled Afghanistan they targeted the Hazaras. The HDP leaders conveniently "forget" not just the US's previous arming of the Sunni fundamentalists in Afghanistan and support for General Zia's dictatorship, but also its initial support for the Taliban regime. At the very point when they were repressing the Hazaras, Washington was eagerly pursuing friendly relations with the Taliban because it viewed them as a welcome ally in its campaign to undermine the Iranian regime.

The plight of the Hazaras and the rise to prominence of the HDP point to the danger that Pakistan's workers and toilers will be sucked into ethnic and communal strife. Quetta has become increasingly ethnically polarized as the rival sections of the local elite jockey for support from the Pakistani government and state and from outside powers, including the US, India and the EU.

Only the working class, on the basis of a socialist program aimed at reorganizing socioeconomic life to secure social rights for all and in intransigent opposition to imperialism, the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan and all factions of the Pakistani bourgeoisie, can secure the democratic rights of all the myriad peoples of the region and create a framework for their amicable and equitable development—the Socialist United States of South Asia.



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