

Mass protests continue in Pakistan's Balochistan province over extra-judicial killings and other state crimes

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11 December 2023

Mass protests have continued for almost three weeks in Pakistan's poorest province, Balochistan, against the Pakistani state's use of forced disappearances, extra-judicial killings and other illegal means to suppress widespread opposition, including an ethno-nationalist separatist insurgency.

The immediate trigger for the protests was last month's extra-judicial killing of 24 year-old Balaach Mola Bakhsh by state security forces.

For some 12 days, thousands took to the streets of Turbat—a city in south-western Balochistan that is the province's second largest—to support a sit-in, initiated by Mola Bakhsh's relatives to demand that the authorities come clean about his death and criminally prosecute those responsible. At the end of last week, the sit-in was converted into a "long march" from Turbat to the provincial capital, Quetta, a distance of almost 800 kilometres or 500 miles. The "march" is in fact a protest caravan, with participants travelling in motorized vehicles and stopping in cities en route to stage rallies and mobilize support. Despite the obvious hostility of the authorities, the protesters have been well-received with local residents helping to provide accommodation.

The Counter-Terrorism Department (CTD) has provided an entirely implausible and self-contradictory account of Mola Bakhsh's death, which it claims occurred in a gunfight, even though on Nov. 21, little more than 24 hours before, the victim had been brought before an Anti-Terrorism Court.

According to the initial CTD statement, Mola Bakhsh "had confessed in custody to being a militant and carrying out a number of attacks. He was arrested on Nov. 20, in possession of five kilograms of explosive materials." The statement, without ever explaining how Mola Bakhsh supposedly escaped captivity, went on to claim that he was killed along with three others in a CTD-led raid on a militant hideout in the city of Turbat.

Subsequently, the CTD changed its story. In a second statement, it claimed Mola Bakhsh had himself led security forces to the hideout and was killed by the insurgents in the ensuing gun battle.

From the beginning, Balaach Mola Bakhsh's family, has categorically rejected the CTD's claims as to how his dead body ended up at the Turbat Teaching Hospital on the night of Nov. 22. They insist he was not involved in any unlawful activities, was "disappeared" by security forces beginning on October 29, and was later killed in an "absolutely fake" encounter.

As part of their campaign to press the authorities to bring those responsible for Balaach's death to account, his family initially refused to bury him. His corpse was displayed during the first six days of the sit-in, held at Turbat's main square, until it risked becoming a health hazard due to decomposition.

On Nov. 25, a lower court judge ordered that First Information Reports (the first step in opening a criminal case) be filed against the CTD Regional Officer and two other CTD officials. But the authorities refused, and the provincial government filed suit in the Balochistan High Court to have the order overturned.

Only on Saturday, Dec. 9, with the protest movement in its 17th day, were FIRs filed against any of those involved. On Monday, the Balochistan High Court ordered the immediate suspension of the four CTD officials against whom FIRs have now been issued.

The protesters, however, are far from satisfied and are demanding, among other things, a full judicial inquiry into Balaach Mola Bakhsh's disappearance and killing.

A resource-rich but impoverished region, Balochistan is politically dominated by a tiny kleptocracy of big capitalists, landlords and state officials; and under virtual army occupation, with tens of thousands security forces deployed against Balochi nationalist insurgents and Islamist militias.

The venal Pakistan bourgeoisie, which has ruled the country for almost half of its existence through open military dictatorship and is currently imposing yet another savage round of IMF austerity, is notorious for resorting to mass violence and criminality in the face of social opposition. This is certainly the case in Balochistan.

In 2006, as it played a leading role in facilitating Washington's neo-colonial Afghan war, the US-backed Musharraf dictatorship feared the growth of regionalist and separatist sentiment in Balochistan, and consequently organized a military operation to kill Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti in his mountain redoubt. The tribal chief of the Bugti clan and a long-time player in the cut-throat politics of the Pakistani elite, Bugti had been agitating for increased autonomy for Balochistan.

When his murder backfired, fueling Balochi nationalist sentiment and the growth of what is considered to be the fifth Baloch nationalist insurgency, Musharraf and subsequent "civilian" governments pursued a policy of militarization. This involved the massive deployment of security forces, forced disappearances, extra-judicial killings, torture and other gross

human rights violations.

The contempt with which Islamabad deals with the legitimate grievances of the impoverished population has fueled the growth of numerous Balochi militant groups, although these groups have themselves no progressive program, based as they are on ethno-nationalist separatism, communalism and appeals to India and the imperialist powers for support.

The bloody regime of repression overseen by the Pakistani military—which remains at the very apex of capitalist rule in the world’s fifth most populous country and the linchpin of the traditional but badly frayed US-Pakistan security partnership—has increasingly become the focus of popular opposition in Balochistan, as in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and elsewhere.

There have been a growing number of demonstrations and sit-ins led by families of the disappeared and murdered.

Both Pakistan’s current interim Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar and his Interior Minister, Sarfaraz Ahmed Bugti, have well-deserved reputations as staunch allies and toadies of the military. They have been strident supporters of its brutal crackdown against the separatist insurgency in their home province of Balochistan.

Nevertheless, this latest extra-judicial killing has triggered widespread popular outrage, triggering the mobilisation of young people and women across the entire south-western region of Makran, of which Tubrat is part. In addition to the sit-in and other demonstrations, there was a complete shutter down strike of all shops and business in Turbat and other towns in Makran Region on Nov. 29. Roads that are part of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) leading from the area to Pakistan’s main business hub, Karachi and Quetta were also blocked by protesters.

The growing outrage over state violence interacts with and is inextricably tied to the mass disaffection over mass poverty and the lack of public services and basic infrastructure, including ready access to drinking water.

Although Balochistan, with a population of almost 10 million, is Pakistan’s least populous and poorest province, it is highly important from an economic and geopolitical standpoint. It is rich in minerals, including copper and gold, and in 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.

The Balochi national-separatists represent and are led by a faction of the Balochi regional bourgeoisie, including traditional *sardars* (tribal leaders), and petty bourgeoisie that hopes to supplant the Pakistani capitalists and military top brass in exploiting the region’s resource wealth and geo-strategic position to make their own deals with imperialism.

The Balochi ethno-nationalist movement developed within the context of the colonial bourgeoisie’s suppression of the mass anti-imperialist struggle and the communal division—under the auspices of British imperialism, the Gandhi-Nehru led Congress Party and Jinnah’s Muslim League—of the Indian subcontinent into a expressly Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India. Like many other such movements, the Baluchi nationalist movement in the 1970s and 1980s assumed socialist garb and appealed for

support from the Soviet Union.

But since the Stalinist bureaucracy restored capitalism and dissolved the USSR, it has orientated ever more explicitly and nakedly toward imperialism.

Under conditions of a US-led imperialist drive to world war and re-division of the world, a section of the Baloch ruling elites has developed the perspective of carving out a separate state, “Greater Balochistan,” including part of Baloch Iran Sistan, so as to make their own deals with imperialism at the expense of the working class and toiling masses.

Thus the Balochi nationalists supported the two-decade long US-NATO invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Since the launching of the CPEC, in 2014, they have further aligned towards US imperialism and their international and regional allies like India.

The most prominent of the separatist militant groups, like the Baloch liberation Army (BLA), have repeatedly carried out terrorist attacks on Chinese engineers and labourers working on the CPEC, which both Washington and New Delhi vehemently oppose.

When the BLA attacked the Chinese consulate in Karachi in Nov. 2018 it rushed to proclaim its responsibility. It stated that “The objective of this attack is clear: we will not tolerate any Chinese military expansionist endeavours on Baloch soil.”

Courting the favor of the Indian bourgeoisie, Pakistan’s traditional strategic rival, and the imperialist powers goes hand in hand with a reactionary exclusivist agenda. Balochi insurgents routinely murder ordinary Punjabis, Hazaras, and Pashtuns who they contemptuously deride as “settlers.”

In opposition to imperialism, the Pakistan bourgeoisie and the entire reactionary communalist state system of South Asia, Balochi workers and youth must base their struggle on the strategy of Permanent Revolution. The most basic democratic rights and social aspirations of working people, including genuine independence from imperialism and real equality among the various ethnic-linguistic and religious groups of South Asia, can only be realized through the struggle to unite the masses of the region in the fight for workers’ power. The working class must rally the rural toilers and oppressed behind it in opposition to all factions of the bourgeoisie and forge unity with workers around the entire region, on the basis of a socialist program aimed at reorganizing socioeconomic life and creating a framework for the amicable and equitable development of all peoples—the Socialist United States of South Asia.



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