

The killing of Pakistani workers and the dead end of Baloch ethno-separatist nationalism

Dr. Zayar

16 September 2024

More than seventy people, including at least 35 civilians, were killed amid a series of attacks across the province of Balochistan in southwestern Pakistan on August 26. According to official reports, 10 districts were targeted by Baloch ethno-nationalist separatist insurgents. They attacked military installations and police stations, blew up a railway track and bridges, blocked highways connecting the province with other parts of the country and burned trucks carrying coal and food.

In an especially vile and reactionary act, the Baloch insurgents checked the identity cards of the passengers on an inter-city bus travelling through Musakhail to Punjab province and separated them into those who were Balochi and those who were not. They then shot and killed 23 people, most of them poor workers, whom they had identified as ethnically Punjabi or Pashtun. One other person survived after being left for dead. Several Punjabi truck drivers were also gunned down.

According to the army's media wing, 14 security personnel were killed, including in twin suicide bombings in Bela, and close to two dozen insurgents died in their counterattacks.

The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), which is fighting for Balochistan's secession from Pakistan, has claimed responsibility for the August 26 attacks. In a social media post released by the BLA's Fidayeen Majeed Brigade, it was claimed that one of the suicide bombings in Bela was carried out by a 23-year-old female student at Turbat Law College, Mahel Baloch. The Fidayeen Majeed Brigade is exclusively aimed at organizing suicide attacks against Pakistani security forces and Chinese personnel working on projects related to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Baloch separatist insurgents have a long and bloody history of targeting Punjabi and Pashtun workers, whom they decry as "outsiders." To mention just two recent atrocities: on April 9, insurgents intercepted a bus on the Quetta-Taftan N-40 Highway, identified and offloaded nine Punjabi passengers travelling with visas to Iran, and then shot them; in May, seven Punjabis who were working in Gwadar barber shops were killed in the middle of the night while they were sleeping.

The BLA is the largest and most prominent of a series of Baloch insurgent groups, some of which are also aligned with like groups in Iran's majority Baloch-speaking southeast. These include the Baloch National Army (BNA), which was itself formed through the merger of the United Baloch Army (UBA) and the Baloch Republic Army (BRA).

For most of the past two decades Balochistan has been under effective Pakistani military occupation.

Incapable of offering any progressive response to the democratic and social aspirations of the people, successive governments in Islamabad and the military have responded to the growth of opposition in what is Pakistan's most impoverished province with brutal repression—including enforced disappearances, torture and extrajudicial killings.

The contempt and brutality with which Islamabad deals with the legitimate grievances of the population has fueled the growth of numerous Baloch nationalist groups and an exclusivist insurgency that has seen atrocities on both sides.

The current insurgency and the BLA's exclusivist, pro-imperialist program

The current insurgency erupted in 2004 during the rule of the US-backed dictator General Musharraf, whose government was playing a pivotal role in facilitating American imperialism's neocolonial Afghan war. It intensified after the military killed Nawab Akbar Bugti, a tribal leader and former Chief Minister and Governor of Balochistan, in 2006. Bugti had taken up arms against the Pakistani state after it rejected his 2005 plan for greater autonomy for the province and a moratorium on the construction of new military bases.

The August 26 attacks, timed to mark the 18th anniversary of Bugti's death, were the largest and most audacious military operation mounted by the BLA to date, and have clearly rattled the government and military establishment.

Pakistan's Balochistan province represents some 44 percent of the country's territory, but with a population of 15 million, little more than 6 percent of its population. It is rich in minerals, including copper and gold, and in natural gas, and borders both Afghanistan and Iran.

The BLA and other Balochi separatist groups invoke a tradition of nationalist insurgency against the reactionary Pakistani bourgeoisie and its state. Over the past three-quarters of a century, tens of thousands, including countless civilians, have been killed in clashes between bourgeois nationalist separatist insurgents and security forces in a series of insurrections.

However, the Balochi separatist movement, despite its militant garb and the self-sacrifice of many of its youthful adherents, is a reactionary blind alley.

It is based on an exclusivist-chauvinist program, targeting Punjabi workers and other "non-Balochis" for murderous attack, and it is openly pro-imperialist.

For years the Balochi separatists have sought to win the backing of Washington and its allies—most importantly India, Pakistan's arch-strategic rival—by presenting themselves and acting as their anti-China attack dog.

This under conditions where the US and its imperialist allies have initiated a global war for the repartition of the world. The US-NATO instigated war against Russia over Ukraine, the Israeli genocide against the Gaza Palestinians which the imperialist powers are backing to the hilt as they intensify military-economic pressure on Iran and the US military-strategic offensive against China are all fronts in this war.

The democratic and social rights of the Balochi masses and of all the workers and toilers of South Asia—including genuine equality among its myriad peoples irrespective of religion or ethnicity, and freedom from imperialist oppression—can and will only be won through working class-led socialist revolution in opposition to all factions of the bourgeoisie and the subcontinent's reactionary communal-based nation-state system.

Partition and the Balochi national question

The Baloch bourgeois-nationalist separatist movement is a misbegotten product of the suppression of the mass anti-imperialist movement that convulsed South Asia between 1917 and 1948. Terrified of the revolutionary dimensions of that movement, and especially the growing militancy of the working class, the rival wings of the colonial bourgeoisie struck a deal with British imperialism to assume control of the colonial capitalist state and communally partition the subcontinent. This betrayal was facilitated by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI), which both subordinated the working class to the Gandhi-Nehru-led Indian National Congress and endorsed the Muslim League's reactionary demand for a separate Muslim state, Pakistan.

Partition led to a massive bloodletting, defied economic, historical and cultural logic, enshrined communalism in the very state structures of South Asia and gave rise to a reactionary strategic conflict between India and Pakistan that has led to numerous wars and war crises. But Partition was only the most striking manifestation of the failure of the national bourgeoisie to fulfill the tasks associated in previous centuries with the democratic revolution, including the radical restructuring of agrarian relations, the separation of Church (religion) and state and the elimination of all feudal and semi-feudal vestiges.

The first Balochi separatist insurgency broke out in 1948 in response to the Khanate of Kalat's incorporation into the new Pakistani state. The Khanate, whose boundaries included a significant swathe of contemporary Pakistani Balochistan, had been a princely (that is subordinate) state within the British India Empire. But with the departure of the British colonial overlords, the Khan made an abortive bid for independence. While he soon relented, his brother, Prince Agha Abdul Karim, supported by various tribal chiefs, mounted a brief-lived insurgency.

A second Balochi separatist insurgency erupted in the late 1950s and a third, the largest, raged from 1973 to 1977. In the 1970s and 1980s—and within the context of the Cold War, in which Pakistan was a staunch ally of the United States and veritable frontline state in Washington's efforts to threaten and destabilize the Soviet Union—the Balochi separatist movement, like many other bourgeois "national liberation" movements in Asia and Africa, assumed socialist garb and appealed for support from Moscow.

However, since the Stalinist bureaucracy restored capitalism and dissolved the USSR, the Balochi separatists and ethno-chauvinists have oriented ever more explicitly and nakedly toward imperialism.

The Balochi nationalists supported the two-decade-long US-NATO invasion and occupation of Afghanistan.

Representing a section of the weak, historically backward Baloch bourgeoisie (with its roots in feudal-tribal relations), they have developed a perspective for a separate "Greater Balochistan," including Iran's majority-Baloch Sistan region, meant to appeal to Washington's predatory geostrategic interests—and all with the hope of securing their own state and the ability to cut their own deals with imperialism at the expense of the working class and toiling masses.

The Baloch separatists and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

Since the launching of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project in 2014, the Baloch secessionist movement has further aligned

itself with US imperialism and its European and regional allies, principally India. Both Washington and New Delhi have opposed the CPEC, with Washington pressuring Pakistan to shut it down and distance itself from China. India has opposed the CPEC from the outset, on the pretext that the transport corridor it has established crosses Gilgit-Baltistan (a part of Kashmir) that India claims as its own.

The CPEC is an element in Beijing's response to the US moves to heavily militarize the Asia-Pacific region, including the South China Sea, in order to threaten China's trade routes at a series of "choke points" in the event of a war crisis. Its pivotal component is the construction of a transport corridor linking Gwadar, a Balochistan Arabian Sea port, via highways, railways and pipelines to China, thereby allowing it to, at least partially, bypass a US blockade of sea lanes.

US imperialism's embrace of India as a frontline state in its preparations for war with Beijing drove Pakistan over the past decade and a half to develop ever closer economic and military relations with China. As a result, Islamabad's traditional partnership with Washington has badly frayed. Israel's genocide in Gaza, with US backing, and their joint war preparations against Iran further intensify the geostrategic significance of Balochistan.

The BLA and the Balochi separatist movement are staunchly against the CPEC and the China-Pakistan strategic partnership in the region and seek to win popular support for this stance by citing the project's impact on the local fishery and other environmental concerns. In November 2018, the BLA targeted the Chinese consulate in Karachi and in a statement justifying it declared: "the objective of this attack is clear: we will not tolerate any Chinese military expansionist endeavors on Baloch soil."

In August, the pro-separatist Baloch Human Rights Council wrote a letter to the UN secretary-general calling for the imperialist-dominated UN to intervene in Balochistan on the grounds that its people were being crushed by Chinese "socialist colonialism" and that the CPEC is a "corridor of death and destruction."

Balochistan and the question of how to secure the democratic rights of the Balochi people are thus increasingly being dragged into US imperialism's rivalry against China with disastrous consequences for the entire region.

Pakistan has already created a 20,000-strong security force to protect Chinese investment projects and personnel, in particular, and to counter Balochi secessionist attacks. However, Chinese security concerns are growing.

During the visit of a senior Chinese official to Islamabad in June, Beijing's message was delivered publicly in an unusually sharp manner. He warned that security issues could threaten CPEC's future and said the deteriorating security situation was "shaking the confidence" of Chinese investors.

Oppose Pakistani state repression!

The August 26 attacks have shaken the Pakistan establishment, leading to a push for intensified military operations and a slew of new anti-democratic measures. At the conclusion of a high-profile meeting in Quetta, Balochistan's capital, attended by top military and federal and provincial ministers, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif vowed that the "enemies of Pakistan, bent on creating unrest in Balochistan, would be defeated with full force," and said dialogue was only possible with those who respect the Constitution of Pakistan and salute the national flag.

On the same day, Washington, which retains ties with Pakistan principally through the seven-decade-old Pentagon-Pakistan military alliance, condemned the attack, but there is a section of the political and

military-security establishment that is cultivating ties with the Balochi separatists. The Biden-Harris administration is using US imperialism's dominant position within the IMF and the urgent attempts of Sharif and his Muslim League (Nawaz)-led minority coalition government to obtain an IMF bailout loan to pressure Islamabad to reduce its ties with Beijing, including by demanding it establish no more CPEC-connected Special Economic Zones, something that in other contexts it strongly favours.

The military and government are using the August 26 attack to justify giving the military and other security forces increased powers to detain people and make warrantless raids and arrests, with a bill to render these draconian changes reportedly approved by cabinet.

As always, the Pakistani state will use these new powers and its "anti-terrorism" measures to brutally crack down on opposition and suppress the democratic rights of the downtrodden and oppressed masses of the entire country, including those of Balochistan. Throughout Pakستان, there is seething opposition to the government which came to power last February in military-rigged elections as it imposes yet another round of brutal IMF-dictated measures, including a massive increase in electricity charges and new indirect taxes.

Two-and-a-half weeks prior to the August 26 attacks, there were long and huge protests carried out by the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC) in Gwadar's Marine Drive in protest against missing persons, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings and exploitation of the resources of Balochistan.

The chief minister of the Balochistan provincial government, which was stitched together by the military and is led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), responded by shutting down internet services across the area and deploying large numbers of security forces to block the roads and prevent the public from attending the Gwadar rally. Four people died in the ensuing clashes and many were injured. In response, the BYC called sit-in protests in 14 locations, which paralysed all of Balochistan.

Responding to these massive protests, the military publicly denounced the BYC as a "proxy" of foreign forces and terrorists.

The BYC is demanding that the thousands of persons who have been abducted by the security forces be recovered, whether now dead or alive, and those responsible tried in the courts according to the law. Forced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, endemic poverty and mass joblessness have radicalised broad sections of the youth, including young women, providing the BYC with its main base of popular support.

The demands for an end to Pakistani state repression and lawlessness are entirely legitimate and can only be realised by mobilising the workers and rural toilers across the region and throughout Pakistan—regardless of national-ethnic, linguistic or religious differences.

Missing persons, extrajudicial killings, along with an end to military operations and other state crimes, including the promotion of communalism and ethno-chauvinism, are burning issues in Balochistan, but they exist generally everywhere in Pakistan and across the subcontinent. Moreover, the more than three-quarters of a century of post-independence rule by the rival national bourgeoisies of South Asia have demonstrated that the struggle to secure basic democratic rights is inseparably bound up with the struggle against capitalism and imperialist oppression, which are at the root of the catastrophic situation facing the masses throughout the region.

The way forward for the workers of Balochistan

While the grievances of the Baloch people are real and deep-rooted, the various separatist insurgent groups and nationalist parties in no way represent their interests. Rather they represent privileged sections of the

bourgeoisie, including the semi-feudal sardars, whose principal grievance is that the Pakistani state denies them a "just share" of Balochistan's natural resources and mineral revenue and the profits otherwise made from the exploitation of its workers and toilers.

As the International Committee of the Fourth International has previously explained, the failure of the "independent" capitalist states established in Asia and Africa in the aftermath of World War II to resolve any of the basic problems of the democratic revolution and the emergence in the 1980s of a new stage in capitalist global integration has given rise to a series of "new national" movements, mired in exclusivism and oriented to imperialism, and therefore hostile to the democratic and social aspirations of the masses:

In India and China, the national movement posed the progressive task of unifying disparate peoples in a common struggle against imperialism—a task which proved unrealisable under the leadership of the national bourgeoisie. This new form of nationalism promotes separatism along ethnic and religious lines, with the aim of dividing up existing states for the benefit of the local exploiters, under the service of global-mobile capital. Such movements have nothing to do with the struggle against imperialism, nor do they in any sense embody the democratic aspirations of oppressed. They serve to divide the working class and divert the class struggle into ethnic-communal warfare.

The murderous violence routinely directed against non-Balochi workers and residents in Balochistan by the ethno-nationalist separatists is a clear expression of the anti-working-class nature of the Balochi nationalist movement. This goes hand in hand with its courting of the favor of the Indian bourgeoisie, offering itself as an ally of New Delhi in its reactionary strategic rivalry with the Pakistani elite, and of the imperialist powers in their ever more aggressive and open drive to thwart China's rise, including through world war.

Balochistan's workers and toilers cannot gain anything by supporting the BLA and the other ethno-separatists in their attempts to secure an "independent" capitalist Balochistan that would be a client state of US imperialism and India, or the demands for greater autonomy within a "reformed" capitalist Pakistan advanced by other sections of the Baloch bourgeoisie.

The working class and all young people who sincerely want to oppose national and all forms of oppression should learn the lessons of the struggle waged by the ICFI and its Sri Lankan section—the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) and its predecessor the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL)—in opposition to the Sinhala bourgeoisie-dominated state's denial of the democratic rights of the Tamil minority.

Throughout the almost three decades of racist civil war incited and provoked by the Sri Lankan state, and in the face of state repression and violent attacks by both the Sinhala-chauvinist JVP and Tamil separatists, the RCL-SEP alone fought for the immediate and complete withdrawal of Sri Lankan security forces from the majority Tamil north and east. At the same time, it explained that the democratic rights of the Tamils could and would only be secured through a common struggle of the Tamil and Sinhalese masses against bourgeois rule and for a United Socialist States of Lanka and Eelam.

This stance has been vindicated by history. If the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was defeated it was because it was hostile to any and all efforts to forge unity with the oppressed Sinhalese workers and rural masses in opposition to capitalism and imperialism. Instead, it based its drive for a separate state on maneuvers with India (which in pursuit of its own predatory interests promptly dumped the LTTE in 1987 and by

force of arms sought to compel it to come to terms with Colombo) and appeals to the US and other imperialist powers.

Fifteen years on, in pursuit of an Indian and US-backed “power-sharing deal” with Colombo, the remnants of the LTTE and other political representatives of the Tamil bourgeoisie have accommodated themselves to a continuing massive presence of security forces in the north and east, support IMF austerity and advance themselves as the foremost champions of Sri Lanka’s alignment with US imperialism against China. Meanwhile, working people—Sinhalese and Tamil alike—are engaging in mass social struggles, cutting across the ethno-communalism fostered by all sections of the bourgeoisie and creating the objective conditions for the securing of the democratic rights of Tamil people in a joint struggle against capitalism and the growing threat of an imperialist-led global war.

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.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact