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Is Rohrabacher wrong on Balochistan?

Men like Rohrabacher are no friends of the Baloch. But what can stop their meddling?

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Dana Rohrabacher's resolution in the US Congress states that the Baloch people "have the right to self-determination and to their own sovereign country". Expectedly, this unleashed a torrent of anger in Pakistan's government and media which overwhelmingly saw this as a conspiracy to break up the country. Pakistan-US relations have descended another notch; attempts by the US State Department, as well as the currently visiting group of Congressmen, to distance themselves from the resolution have not worked.

Rohrabacher is easy to criticise. This extremist Republican has defended the use of torture, advocated the induction of warlords into the Afghan government, thinks trees cause global warming, and wants subsidies for rain forests to be cut down. Last July, while visiting Baghdad, he raised a storm by suggesting that Iraq pay back the United States the billions it spent after the 2003 invasion.

But this right-wing nut — obviously motivated by domestic politics rather than human rights — may actually have done Pakistan a favour by focusing world attention upon the horror of today's Balochistan. Predictably, Baloch leaders are enthusiastically endorsing Rohrabacher's statement, "The political and ethnic discrimination the Baloch suffer is tragic and made more so because America is financing and selling arms to their oppressors in Islamabad."

For decades, the Baloch have complained of ill-treatment. They say their natural wealth has been expropriated by Punjab and that Balochistan's natural gas reached remote Punjabi towns long before it was available in Quetta — and then only because an army cantonment needed it. Baloch representation in the civil and the military bureaucracy remains close to zero.

But rather than assuage national grievances, both real and imagined ones, the Pakistani establishment used the iron fist. In 1972, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto reinvigorated an army defeated by India in 1971 by sending it to quell the Baloch uprising. Thousands died. In 2006, under General Pervez Musharraf the Army claimed the killing of 80-year old Nawab Akbar Bugti as yet another victory, saying this would end the insurgency. But it turned out otherwise, and Bugti's murder was yet another thread torn loose from the unraveling national fabric. Vengeful Baloch nationalists now target non-Baloch innocents and have murdered, among others, Punjabi and Mohajir teachers.

Pakistani security forces deny any wrongdoing and General Kayani claims that military operations are no longer being carried out against Baloch nationalists. But newspaper accounts suggest that the abduct-torture-kill-dump formula may be officially sanctioned from above. Mutilated bodies are strewn across roadsides and found in garbage dumps.

Worried about further internationalisation in the wake of Rohrabacher's bill, Interior Minister Rehman Malik is scurrying around offering palliatives and promises. But the Baloch Republican Party's exiled chief, Brahamdagh Bugti, whose sister and niece were mysteriously murdered in Karachi earlier this month, says that "America must intervene in Balochistan and stop the ethnic cleansing of Baloch people".

Such open appeals, in my opinion, are short-sighted because they invite heightened repression. Moreover, America's betrayal of Kurdish national self-determination should not be forgotten. In 1975, the Kurdish Peshmerga discovered to its horror that American support suddenly vanished after Richard Nixon chose to side with the Shah of Iran and Saddam Hussain.

The official Pakistani response to Rohrabacher is still more flawed. Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar termed the tabling of his bill "a violation of UN charter" and of Pakistan's sovereignty. But this line of defence could forfeit Pakistan's moral right to criticise other states, Syria and India included.

Consider the fact that on February 17 Pakistan voted for an Arab League-sponsored resolution in the UN General Assembly which calls upon Syria's President Bashar al-Assad to step down. This surely constitutes interference in the internal matter of a sovereign country. But Pakistan did well. In a civilised world national sovereignty must come second, and human rights first.

Pakistan has also long criticised India — and justly so — for its human rights abuses. But more people are dying in Balochistan today than in Kashmir. For all their brutality against stone-throwing Kashmiri boys, the Indians have not yet used helicopter gunships and fighter jets against Kashmiris. Pakistan, on the other hand, uses airpower as a matter of course in Balochistan and Fata.

Is there a way out? Maybe so, but for that Pakistan must hear what Baloch nationalists are saying — and then act. In 2008, Sanaullah Baloch, who had then just quit the Pakistan Senate, wrote that “Islamabad's recent move to grant religious self-rule to the Taliban in Swat and the denial of political autonomy to the people of Balochistan are beyond comprehension”.

Sanaullah's list of demands — still unmet today — were not unreasonable: a) end the military operation and halt construction of military and paramilitary cantonments; b) withdraw security forces; c) repatriate and rehabilitate displaced persons; d) cancel civil/military land allotments; e) demilitarise the area; f) ensure equal wellhead prices for Baluchistan's gas, and h) abandon torture camps and establish a “truth and reconciliation commission” for trying those involved in killing Nawab Akbar Bugti and Balach Marri.

A similar list by Mir Mohammad Ali Talpur was published in 2008 wherein he rhetorically asked: a) Will the new airport in Gwadar be handed over to the CAA to ensure that a military base is not established there? b) Will Saindak's unjust income-sharing formula be reversed to give Balochistan 48 per cent and the centre two per cent? c) Will they refrain from using Hingol National Park as a testing ground for the air force?

The Rohrabacher show will roll off the stage soon but Balochistan's situation shall remain. More people will disappear, and the heap of mutilated corpses shall keep mounting. For now, the Pakistan Army and the Frontier Corps can ensure that there is no independent Balochistan. But their actions cannot lead to peace and reconciliation.

Men like Rohrabacher are no friends of the Baloch. But what can stop their meddling? The answer can only come once we dump the myth of Pakistan being one nation, one people. The Baloch cannot agree with ‘what is yours is mine, what is mine is mine’. If Pakistanis value the people of Balochistan rather than the wealth under their ground, they must make every possible compromise to draw them into the mainstream.

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