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Is Pakistan heading for disaster in Balochistan?

Pakistan must end its policy of killings and kidnappings of Baloch people and recognise the importance of the region.

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Despite Balochistan's rich cultural history and plentiful natural resources, Pakistan's government continues daily harassment and killings that are causing the people to think about independence [GALLO/GETTY]

Washington, DC - The behaviour of the powerful elite of Islamabad reminds me of the captain and crew of the RMS Titanic sailing into the night, heading straight towards an iceberg. The civilian, military and judicial authorities are locked up in a tussle coloured by political positions

and personal egos. And there is a dangerous disconnect between Islamabad and the enormous problems that loom on the Pakistani horizon.

Law and order appears to have collapsed in many parts of the country. In the north-east, the former Frontier Province, there are daily killings as suicide bombers and the army continuously fight each other. Unemployment is widespread and inflation is sky-high. And there is still a desperate shortage of electricity and gas in much of the country.

But perhaps none of these problems is more pressing than the situation in Balochistan. If the simmering, but widespread movement for independence spins out of control, Pakistan will find it almost impossible to maintain nationhood.

I was reminded of Balochistan by the recent visit of Malik Siraj Akbar to my office. It made me happy to think back to my associations with its people and places, but I also became distressed as I thought of the current situation: a climate of killings and so-called "disappearances".

In his late twenties, Malik comes from Makran and was born in its northern town, Panjgur. His sharp intelligence, awareness of the world and passionate arguments for his people reminded me of all the people I met in Makran as Commissioner when I was posted there in the mid-1980s.

On arrival, what struck me was the resilience and faith of the Baloch, in spite of the widespread poverty and lack of economic development. Even after decades of the country's existence, Pakistan - it seemed - had done very little for the Baloch. There were only five miles of paved road in Makran - from the Commissioner's house, in Turbat, to the tiny airport. Flights were irregular and the telephone lines to the rest of the country were frequently out of order.

A land of honour

But I found it a fascinating experience: the people were welcoming and the area was redolent of history. Makran was, after all, where Alexander the Great got lost on his way to Persia after his battles in India. Over time, I had the privilege of meeting and getting to know legendary Baloch leaders such as Nawab Akbar Bugti, Mir Ghaus Bukh Bizenjo, Jam Ghulam Qadir and Mir Jafar Khan Jamali. From them, I learned that there was a time when a woman wearing gold ornaments could travel from the north of Balochistan to the south and not be molested.

"There was honour," they said, "in the land."

Nawab Bugti discussed Ibn Khaldun and the cyclical patterns of tribal society with me over dinner in his ancestral home in the Bugti Agency. He told me that Ibn Khaldun had kept him company when he was jailed by Pakistani authorities in Sahiwal. I often wondered how many Pakistanis belonging to the power elite had even heard of the Arab historian.

I grew to appreciate and admire the Baloch. I knew it was most important to deal with them on the basis of honour. In turn, they reciprocated my sentiments and I was posted as Commissioner of three divisions consecutively. Even the imperial British acknowledged that the key to dealing with the Baloch was honour. Not surprisingly, the Baloch complain that Pakistani officials treat

them worse than the imperial British.

Malik, who has been a professional journalist all his life, has recently been given political asylum in the United States. Various threats and messages convinced him his life was in danger. He talks passionately and movingly of the hundreds of Baloch who have been brutally killed by the security agencies.

The policy of "kill and dump" is causing fear and terror among the Baloch.

He claims there is a systematic policy to eliminate the "cream of the Baloch professionals". He lists names and professions with depressing accuracy - professors of medicine, scholars of Baloch history and, of course, numerous journalists.

"At least eight of my Baloch journalist friends have been killed over the past year," he said. Some had disappeared - until their mutilated, bullet-riddled bodies were found.

Cultural onslaught

The Baloch are angry not only at the killing of their intellectual and professional elite, but at what appears to be a wider, deliberate cultural onslaught. Security personnel, invariably non-Baloch, insult the Baloch at checkpoints by cutting off the shalwar, or baggy pants. More worryingly, Baloch corpses of those who have mysteriously disappeared are routinely found mutilated and desecrated. One chilling message engraved with a knife on the chest of a corpse said, "Eid gift for Baloch."

The brutal and senseless murder of **Nawab Bugti** and the deliberate insult to his corpse by President Pervez Musharraf acted as a catalyst in Balochistan. It gave the Baloch independence movement a much needed second wind - the Baloch now had a legitimate martyr for their cause. Paradoxically, Malik points out, Nawab was one of the few advocates for a united Pakistan.

Islamabad has always underestimated, and therefore mismanaged, those living on the periphery. Islamabad tends to dismiss Balochistan because of its tiny population - about eight million of Pakistan's total 180 million people. There is also the prism of racial and cultural arrogance through which the Baloch are seen. Then there is sheer ignorance: the rich culture and traditions of the Baloch are generally not known in Pakistan.

Those who do not learn from the lessons of history, it is said, are doomed to repeat it.

In a different context, but one which illuminates the Balochistan situation, Islamabad's treatment of East Pakistan cost it half the country in terms of population. The colossal blunders and arrogance of the power elite of Islamabad and the tragic killings of 1971 led to the creation of Bangladesh.

Pakistanis seem to forget that Balochistan may only have a tiny population - but comprises 44

per cent of Pakistan's land territory. They forget it has vast natural resources and hundreds of miles of sea coast which make it a key geopolitical area. While Balochistan can survive without Pakistan, it is Pakistan that simply cannot survive without Balochistan.

Time is running out

Everything, therefore, must be done to resolve the civil war situation in that province. The stakes are too high for Pakistan. The power elite, obsessed with the place intrigue involving the sordid "Memogate" affair, needs to focus its attention on Balochistan.

Prime Minister Yousuf Reza Gilani and General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, head of the army, need to fly to Balochistan together and, setting aside personal egos for the sake of the country, apologise to the people of Balochistan for the grievances they have suffered. They must promise a new beginning and radical shift in Pakistan's strategy for the Baloch. The Baloch must be made to feel an integral part of the federation; they need to be treated with honour and dignity.

This initiative should have been taken after the disastrous actions of Musharraf in Balochistan. Muddling through is no longer an option - time is running out for Pakistan.

Perhaps these Pakistani leaders, no doubt both patriotic in their own ways, need to ask themselves what the great MA Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, would have done in a similar situation. Jinnah would have met the people of Balochistan and ensured that they knew they were a welcome, respected and genuine part of the federation of Pakistan. No democracy can be built on the foundations of the kind of mistrust and anger that prevails in Balochistan.

When I asked Malik what he had to say to Pakistan, he replied: "My message to Pakistan is simple: everyone should be provided equal opportunities of progress and prosperity. Who would like to live in a country which sends bullet-riddled dead bodies of young Baloch professionals on a regular basis? Underestimating the situation in Balochistan would amount to committing political suicide."