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The Promised Land

Why Baluchi nationalism, Pakistan's modernization and the Army are a combustible mix

By Nicholas Schmidle

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ON A TYPICALLY HOT MORNING IN OCTOBER, about a dozen people squeezed into Majid Sohrabi's office, sitting on the black pleather chairs pushed up against the walls. A ceiling fan whirled and wobbled on its axis overhead. Sohrabi, the 30-something *nazim*, or mayor, of Gwadar, looked overwhelmed. Politics are something new. Before winning an election in 2005, he had spent ten years working on behalf of various NGOs around Gwadar implementing nutrition and education programs for women. On this morning, he wore a plain gray *shalwar kameez*, the trousers-and-tunic getup ubiquitous in Pakistan. His front tooth was chipped in half and slightly blackened. A trickle of sweat inched down the side of his face.

Half of the people in the office were townsfolk there to complain about shortcomings in drinking water, electricity and schools. The others were political activists in their mid- to late-20s, most of them former members of the Baluch Students Organization, or BSO. They served simultaneously as Sohrabi's couriers and his think-tank, off running an errand one minute, proffering advice the next. When one old man groaned that the water in his neighborhood was only running for a few hours a day, Sohrabi scanned the room for feedback. The ceiling fan tick-tick-tick-ed with each revolution. No one proffered any compelling ideas for keeping the water on all day. Sohrabi released a long, puffy-cheeked sigh. "Gwadar is supposed to be a city for the future, but every day local people are crying about water and basic health facilities," he said. "If the government can build a port, why can't they build a new school?"

The frustration many Baluchis feel regarding the lack of schools and running water across Baluchistan is fueling a growing Baluch nationalist movement, along with some talk of secession. Nationalist leaders say that the government's resolve to build a port in Gwadar could cause the breakup of Pakistan.

For now, Gwadar is a small town of roughly 80,000 people on the coast of Baluchistan, facing the Arabian Sea. Its natural harbor has for centuries attracted fisherman and traders shuttling between Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. In the 1920s, a team of British engineers visited and noted its optimal natural layout for a deep-sea port, but they never did anything about it. The same things that impressed the British drew the attention of Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf. In March 2002, he envisioned "history being made" when he publicly announced his plan to build a port in Gwadar. "There is no doubt that Gwadar port, when operational, will play the role of a regional hub for trade and commercial activity," he said. "The people of Gwadar and Makran...will get ample job opportunities which will raise their standard of living." In the same speech, he thanked "our very close friends, the People's Republic of China," who have supplied most of the financial and technological assistance. "Without their assistance, perhaps, this project may not have taken off."

Once it is up and running, the government expects Gwadar to be in a league

with other neon port cities like Dubai and Shanghai. To accommodate the millions of hustlers who will inevitably come looking to make a rupee or two, the Pakistani government wants to turn Majid Sohrabi's city into a seaside metropolis with skyscrapers, fancy resorts and docks big enough for the Titanic. In an interview, one representative from the Gwadar Development Authority who requested anonymity, even casually mentioned Saint-Tropez as a point of comparison. "I really believe in this project," he said. The first five-star hotel, the Pearl Continental, is almost completed, glass elevator and all.

The Gwadar Development Authority, an office tasked with preparing the city for the future, officially estimates that 1.7 million people will move to Gwadar in the next 30 years. Unofficially, the same representative who imagined the French Riviera in Baluchistan told me that four million people was a more reasonable guess. "And potentially in much less than thirty years." This impending population explosion could be a Baluch's dream: waves of gullible tourists, delegations of investors armed with expense accounts, and a long list of big-money construction contracts. But that's not how they see it happening. "Just look at our history," Sohrabi told me, "the government has simply not been sincere with the people of Baluchistan."

Signs of neglect pervade Baluchistan, the largest of Pakistan's four federal provinces. While the Pearl Continental rises luxuriously on one side of Gwadar, local

hotel owners stock bathrooms with plastic pales of water so guests can bathe when the taps run dry. Development has been terribly uneven when compared to the other provinces. Just 20 percent of people in Baluchistan have access to safe drinking water, compared to 86 percent elsewhere in the country. Only 15 percent of women can read. Healthcare facilities are under-equipped, understaffed, and unsanitary.

On the morning I sat in Sohrabi's office, he was deliberating over the fate of a school for girls, age 12 and under. For the past several years, an abandoned dispensary functioned as the schoolhouse. Now, the health department was reclaiming the dispensary — and evicting the school. Sohrabi had to decide which was more expendable: a school for young girls or a dispensary? I asked him which way he was leaning. "We are supporting the teacher," he said. She was a rare find — brave, smart and hard-working. "We should be encouraging teachers like her, not making life more difficult." While politicians in Islamabad trumpet indicators of Pakistan's recent economic upswing, like annual increases in GDP (more than six percent, several years running) and the increasing number of cell phone users (more than 30 million), Baluchis are weighing the pros and cons between a school and a dispensary.

Despite his frustration, however, Sohrabi hasn't joined up with those calling for an independent Baluch-



istan. In line with his political party, the National Party, he speaks about gaining greater provincial autonomy for Baluchistan within the constitutional framework of Pakistan. "We should be the owners of our mines, our seas and our lands," he said. Provincial autonomy would mean that profits from Gwadar would be sent directly to the provincial government in Quetta, rather than to Islamabad. Presently, each province channels its revenues to the central government, which then redistributes them based on the province's share of the population. Though Baluchistan covers nearly half of Pakistan, its share of the population — and thus, of the total revenue — accounts for less than 10 percent. Getting that relatively small amount of money to the outlying villages, spread across a territory the size of Germany, is nearly impossible. Hence, the abundance of mud huts and the lack of electricity across most of the area. But with Gwadar expected to generate huge profits in the coming years, Sohrabi and his party are determined to get a better deal. "We simply want what is legitimately ours," he said.



A field in Quetta where the Taliban (seated under the trees on the right) come daily to watch soccer games.

Amongst a growing number of Baluchis, however, there is talk about breaking away from Pakistan. Jabbar, one of the young activists who sat in Sohrabi's office, told me that he could never consider himself a Pakistani. A soft-spoken guy with wavy, surfer hair, he said that when his Baluchi friends go to Dubai or Oman, they always introduce themselves as Baluchis, not Pakistanis: "Otherwise, it just sounds awkward. People in other countries don't trust Pakistanis and we don't either." Jabbar said, "If our leaders [in the National Party] can demand and gain for us our full provincial rights, then, ok, we'll be happy."

"What if they can't?"

"Then we'll build up pressure...and achieve our target," he said.

"Which is what?" I asked.

"I want a free Baluchistan."

In some parts of Baluchistan, a rebellion is already underway. The Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA), a well-armed organization that most believe is led by a member of the Baluchistan Provincial Assembly, regularly attacks railways, oil and gas installations, and Pakistani

Army garrisons. The Pakistani Army has responded to the insurgency by deploying tens of thousands of troops, along with sophisticated weaponry, to the mountain areas where the BLA is strongest. The low-level civil war has already killed hundreds of people and is straining the resources and attention of one of the United States' most valued allies in the "War on Terror." But more than that, it is threatening the cohesion and integrity of Pakistan.

Some months back, a Baluchi friend and I were dining at a Chinese restaurant in Islamabad, discussing my plans my visit Quetta. He encouraged me to come soon. Violence was getting worse by the day and no one knew who was really responsible. The BLA, the Taliban, and even the Pakistani intelligence services were all suspect, he said.

"Plus, if you wait too long," he began, before scanning the room and cracking a devilish smile, "you might need a visa."

LIKE OTHER HOUSES in his Quetta neighborhood, Akhtar Mengal's home is fronted by a tall, steel gate. Quetta, the provincial capital of Baluchistan, sits in a desert valley at an altitude comparable to mile-high Denver and is surrounded by a similar, Wild West mystique.

The Afghan border is less than three hours away. Most of the people walking in the streets are men wrapped in bulbous turbans; the few women out are either covered in scarves and blankets, or shrouded in a head-to-toe, shuttlecock *burqa*. The Taliban roam the markets and congregate in well-known spots every evening to watch young boys play soccer. During the week I was there, a bomb blast ripped through a gas pipeline in the city. A few days earlier, the District Superintendent of Police's brother was gunned down near a park in broad daylight. Anyone who can afford a tall steel gate has one.

When I arrived at Mengal's gate for our meeting, half a dozen guards, at least two of them clutching Kalashnikovs, stood watch on the other side before eventually waving me in. They directed me to Mengal's office, where he sat behind a grand executive desk. Mengal, 44, is the President of the Baluchistan National Party (BNP) — a completely different outfit from Sohrabi's National Party — and an outspoken leader of the swelling nationalist movement. He is short, with a well kempt beard and slightly thinning hair. In September, he and his fellow party members resigned from their Senate, National Assembly and Provincial Assembly seats in protest against aggressive military action in Baluchistan and the army's killing of revered tribal chief, Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti. "During two hundred years of British rule, they never did the kind of things to Baluchis that Pakistan has done to us," Mengal said. A gun catalogue rested atop a stack of magazines on his coffee table.

Akhtar Mengal's real authority flows less from his leadership of the BNP, than from his role as the political *sardar*, or chief, of the 100,000-person Mengal tribe in



An Afghan child in Quetta

southern Baluchistan. ("My nephew is the sardar," he said, "but since he is too young, I was appointed the caretaker.") According to tribal traditions, the sardar oversees private courts, jails and law enforcement units, known as *levies*. "Our tribal system, if not misused, is the quickest and easiest justice that people can receive," Ataullah Mengal, Akhtar's father, explained. In 1968, Pakistan's Criminal Law Ordinance legalized what had already been practiced for centuries by recognizing the *jirga*, or tribal council, as a legitimate body for resolving legal disputes in the tribal areas. The ordinance further acknowledged the levies as legitimate policing units. Ninety-five percent of Baluchistan was declared under the influence of tribal law, to be maintained through *jirgas*, levies and the sardars; the remaining 5 percent was to be governed according to Pakistan's legal code.

This *laissez-faire* method of "governing" the tribal areas of Baluchistan couldn't last forever. Politicians in Islamabad calculated that, sooner than later, they would have to cut the sardars down to size. The first opportunity came in February 1973, when Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto dissolved the Baluchistan Provincial Assembly, which at the time was being run by nationalists. Ataullah Mengal was Chief Minister, and Ghaus Bakhsh Bizenjo, another prominent nationalist, was Governor. Bhutto's decision was in response to the alleged discovery of a stash of weapons in the Iraqi Embassy, totaling some 300 Kalashnikovs and 48,000 rounds of ammunition, destined for Baluchistan. The Iraqis, Bhutto argued, wanted to kick-start a massive rebellion amongst the Baluchi tribes that would spill over and infect the Baluch-populated areas of Iraq's archenemy, Iran. "The whole thing was such a cock-and-bull story," Ataullah Mengal told me one day in his Karachi home. "Bhutto was a victim of a severe inferiority complex. He just wanted to prove to himself that he was the most powerful." After sacking the assembly, Bhutto threw Ataullah, Bizenjo, and Khair Bakhsh Marri, the chief of perhaps the most militant of Baluchistan's tribes, into prison.

In April of 1973, bands of Baluch nationalists, provoked by the imprisonment of their beloved sardars, launched a guerilla war against the Pakistani Army. The Army sent more than 80,000 troops to Baluchistan to beat back the insurgency; the Shah of Iran chipped in \$200 million and 30 Huey Cobra helicopters. The rebellion lasted four years, but the guerillas, who had only Lee Enfield .303 bolt-action rifles, never really stood a chance against such superior firepower. "Back then, if you had fifty rounds of ammunition, you were a rich man," Ataullah Mengal told me. "And after five or six shots, the gun would get all hot and stuck." More than 5,000 Baluch fighters and 3,000 military personnel died during the four-year insurrection.

On July 5, 1977, Bhutto's top general, Zia ul Haq, staged a military coup and overthrew Bhutto. Zia immediately dismantled the tribunal Bhutto had set up to try Ataullah Mengal, Bizenjo and Marri on charges of treason. Afterwards, Ataullah moved to London. He stayed there

for almost two decades. Eventually, the “suffocating and sickening” weather in London compelled him to move back to Pakistan. That, and the fact that he “thought things had changed.” He said, “During [former Prime Minister] Nawaz Sharif’s time, there was some political juggling going on. But when there is a military dictator like Musharraf, you can’t do any political juggling. Either you leave the country, sit in the corner and forget about politics, or wait for the worst. Right now, we are waiting for the worst.”

In 2005, another wave of agitation and insurgency swept across Baluchistan. The Pakistani army has amassed tens of thousands of troops (exact numbers are unknown and estimates range from 50,000 to 100,000) to battle the nationalists, most of whom are concentrated in the natural-gas-rich areas of eastern Baluchistan. The guerillas have put down their antique Lee Enfields for Kalashnikovs, mortars, RPG-7s, and even anti-aircraft weapons. Musharraf blames the crisis on three tribes and their “anti-development sardars:” Ataullah Mengal (and his son, Akhtar), Khair Bakhsh Marri and the late Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti. He claims that these three are orchestrating the insurgency and trying to sabotage Gwadar’s development. “The sardars have been pampered in the past,” Musharraf said last July, “but no more. The writ of the state will be established in Baluchistan.” Musharraf says that a fully functioning port at Gwadar will create thousands of jobs and improve people’s livelihoods, thus eroding tribal bonds, giving the Baluch a greater stake in Pakistan, and, in turn, making the sardars obsolete. “Musharraf is right [about us being his political enemies]. We will not allow him to use the port in Gwadar or to continue taking our gas,” Ataullah said. “The people of Baluchistan have the right to use that port and to use the natural gas on their lands for their own good. If there is a surplus, then he can have it.”

Sitting in the office of his Quetta home, Akhtar Mengal doesn’t utter a word about sharing any part of Baluchistan’s wealth with the rest of Pakistan, surplus or not. His views are significantly more radical than his father’s, reflecting a generational gap that is evident across Baluchistan. “We have been demanding autonomy for decades,” he said. “But every time we ask for it, the military launches an operation. The youth don’t believe that asking for autonomy will bring any change. They feel like they are banging their heads against the wall.” If we are going to face the army’s wrath either way, Mengal thinks, why not ask for separation?

I asked if he knew about a controversial article published last summer in *Armed Forces Journal*, which proposed redrawing the Middle East along ethnic and



Throughout most of Baluchistan, gas stations are bucket-and-hose contraptions.

sectarian lines, including, among other things, a “Free Kurdistan” and a “Free Baluchistan.” “We weren’t aware of that map until it came under discussion in the National Assembly,” he said. (For a look at the article and accompanying map, go to: <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2006/06/1833899>)

“In the National Assembly?”

“Yeah. Someone from the MMA [the six-party, hard-line alliance of religious parties] first brought it up.” They argued that the map was evidence of American designs to undermine Pakistan. “I told someone to get me a copy of that map,” Mengal said, grinning.

Mengal’s politics have attracted some unwanted attention. He and his family are under constant surveillance by the various intelligence agencies, which one local journalist described as “practically ruling Baluchistan.” According to a report published by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan last year, suspected nationalist sympathizers are often picked up and taken to “private torture cells run by intelligence agencies” where they are “blindfolded and handcuffed and tortured through various means, including injection of unknown chemicals, humiliation and stripping.”

Last April, Mengal told me, agents working for Military Intelligence (MI), a wing of the army, tried to kidnap

his kids. The drama unfolded over a span of two days, when someone called the principal of Bay View Academy, the school two of his three children attend, saying the kids had been abducted. Mengal, who was in Quetta at the time, rushed back to his Karachi home. "Don't let the kids leave the house," he told his wife.

Two days later, he took the kids to school himself. On the way, he noticed a pair of Honda motorcycles, each with a driver and a passenger, trailing behind. When he dropped his two daughters off at Bay View, the motorcycles were still in his rearview mirror. He then dropped his son off at a different school. Still there. They followed him back to his house. Having anticipated this, Mengal had told his bodyguards to trail him in a different car. Near his home, he ordered the bodyguards to speed up and trap the motorcycles. One duo escaped. Mengal and his bodyguards dragged the others into his house. They slapped them a few times, though "not enough to draw blood."

"Who are you? Why are you following me?" Mengal barked.

The two men, one in his 20s and the other in his early 30s, reached into their wallets and produced their identification cards. They both wore a shalwar kameez and looked, according to Mengal, "like any other mobile phone snatcher, car-jacker or kidnapper."

"We are from MI," one replied. "We are on duty." Both of them were shaking with fear.

"What duty do you have trying to kidnap my children?"

They denied that they were trying to kidnap the kids and said that the kidnappers "belonged to another agency." Mengal was unsatisfied, so he kept them tied up. Meanwhile, the other tandem had reached headquarters and relayed news of their colleagues' capture. Within a half-hour, a Major in plainclothes from MI showed up at the door. ("Nobody in this country wears a uniform besides Musharraf," Mengal joked.)

The Major demanded that Mengal hand over his guys.

"Your men are with me. I'll give them to the police."

When the police arrived shortly thereafter to claim the two MI agents, they issued Mengal a notice saying that his weapons' licenses had been cancelled, effective immediately. Mengal handed over two AK-47s and his personal pistol. Meanwhile, the authorities had laid siege to his house.

Outside, police trucks surrounded the house, snipers perched behind walls and on neighboring roofs, and floodlights illuminated the whole block. Buses blocked a major thoroughfare that serves the upscale Defense

Housing Authority neighborhood, causing panic among unsuspecting neighbors. The authorities cut the water supply, phone lines and electricity running into Mengal's house.

The siege lasted more than a week. No one was allowed to enter or leave. Food and water had to be brought from outside; all of it was inspected for hidden weapons before being passed into Mengal. Finally, several hundred BNP party workers gathered across the street to chant, demonstrate and demand Mengal's release. They eventually rolled a water tanker through the police cordon, and broke the stalemate. I was in Mengal's neighborhood six months after the incident, and saw a handful of policemen still sitting under a makeshift lean-to, pitching against a telephone pole at the end of the street, surveying the scene.

After Mengal finished telling me the story, he slowly shook his head back and forth. "There is simply no space for us anymore under the umbrella of Pakistan," he said. For him, it's become more than Baluchistan's resources — the Baluchi people's very identity is at stake. "When you history is denied, when your culture is in danger, and when your language disappears, how can you say 'I have a future?'"

I asked what that realization meant in terms of the resistance.

"They say that all is fair in love and war," he replied. "When the matter comes to war, everyone has the right to destabilize the government. When will the world see what the Pakistani regime has been doing to us for the last sixty years? Why does the world keep neglecting our screams?"

MORE THAN A THOUSAND years before the creation of Pakistan, the Baluch left their Kurdish brethren in the mountains of modern-day Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, and migrated to modern-day Baluchistan. Today, like the Kurds, the Baluch are spread across several countries; there are roughly 5 million Baluch in Pakistan, 1.5 million in Iran, and another million in Afghanistan. Also like the Kurds, they speak a language classified in the Iranian group of Indo-European languages. (In Pakistan, most Baluchis speak Baluchi, while some speak a Dravidian language known as Brahui.) In each country, the language bears heavy accretions of the dominant tongue: in Pakistan, it is laced with Urdu; in Afghanistan, with Dari; and in Iran, with Persian. "Baluchis are not ruling anywhere right now, so even our language is trampled on," explained Ghaffar Hoth, the *naib nazim*, or deputy mayor, of Gwadar District.

The Baluchi tribes fought amongst themselves for hundreds of years before the arrival of Naseer Khan the Great in 1749. Naseer Khan, the sixth Khan of Kalat, extended his kingdom over all of the Baluchi-speaking regions of modern-day Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

(In the *Armed Forces Journal* article, an accompanying map published showing what a “Free Baluchistan” would look like, reflected, more or less, the borders of Kalat during the time of Naseer Khan.) Though previous *khans*, or tribal chiefs, had claimed singular leadership of the Baluchi people as far back as 1410, foreign invasions and tribal rivalries undermined anything resembling a centralized “nation.” Naseer Khan shored up his authority by raising an army of 30,000 men. Sir Henry Pottinger, an English spy who later toured Baluchistan disguised as a Tartar horse-trader, described Naseer Khan as being “a most extraordinary combination of all the virtues attached to soldier, statesmen or prince.” When Naseer Khan died in 1794, the Baluch kingdom was at its zenith. But the “Great Game” between Russia and England for control of Central Asia was about to heat up — and Baluchistan covered one of the most sought-after pieces of real estate in the world.

By the middle of the 19th century, the British Empire had become obsessed with protecting India, its prized colony, against the Russian Empire’s rapid expansion. (At the time, it was growing an average of 55 square miles a day.) The British strategy for keeping the Russians at bay centered on forging relationships with buffer states and patronizing vassals along India’s western frontier. Some relationships worked out better than others. In 1839, the British marched a 15,000-man fighting force (trailed by 30,000 wives and servants), known as the “Army of the Indus,” into Afghanistan. They occupied the country with relative ease, but placed an unpopular monarch on the throne. Within three years, resentment against the British boiled over. The Afghans revolted and slaughtered thousands in the streets of Kabul. Sixteen thousand British men and women, along with their Indian servants, fled, but only one, a doctor named William Brydon, escaped alive. After this fiasco, the Russians were bound to capitalize on anti-British sentiments in Kabul and extend their influence there, so the British thought. Only one nation stood between Afghanistan and the western edge of British India: Baluchistan.

In July 1876, Sir Robert Sandeman, a political officer, became the first Englishman to visit the Khan of Kalat on official business. Ostensibly, Sandeman went to help the Khan resolve some differences between feuding sardars. He was certainly fit for the task; he had spent the previous ten years as District Officer of Dera Ghazi Khan, a region in Punjab populated by Baluchi tribes, and he had shown a penchant for dealing with the Baluch. His negotiations with Khodadad Khan, who ruled Kalat at the time and wore his hair in long, curly tresses that fell to his shoulders, changed the complexion of Baluchistan forever. “Khodadad Khan was the last sovereign ruler of Baluchistan,” said Noori Naseer Khan, an 87-year-old historian living in Quetta. It remains unclear how the Englishman wrestled such a major concession out of Khodadad Khan, but shortly after their “negotiations” ended, Sandeman was named the governor-general of Baluchistan. This expanded Britain’s authority right up

to the borders of Afghanistan and Persia. Added Noori Naseer Khan, “When the British people conquered India, they also conquered two other countries: on the east, Burma; and on the west, Baluchistan.”

The British ruled Baluchistan for the next 70 years. From early on, they saw that incorporating the sardars would be problematic, so they divided Baluchistan into two parts. One part, British Baluchistan, consisted of the sensitive border areas with Afghanistan and was made up mostly of Pashtuns, a major ethnic group in present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. The other part, Baluchistan, consisted of the interior areas and was governed through the sardars. In return, the sardars swore their allegiance to the British Crown and took total responsibility for their tribe’s affairs.

In 1947, the British began discussions on how to divide the subcontinent following their imminent departure. In August, less than ten days before the Partition, the Viceroy of India, Lord Louis Mountbatten, notified the Khan of Kalat that only two “princely states,” out of the more than 700 scattered throughout India at the time, would gain full independence following Britain’s withdrawal. One was Nepal and the other was Kalat. (Burma had already gained its independence in 1937.) On August 11, 1947, four days before the formation of Pakistan, the Khan of Kalat declared independence; *The New York Times* reported it the next day with a map showing the new state. Shortly thereafter, the Khan formed a government in Kalat with two houses of parliament, one made of elected representatives and the other made of sardars. Still, internal divisions continued to haunt Baluchistan. By 1948, three chunks of territory, traditionally under the sway of the Khan of Kalat, including the Makran coastal region, acceded to Pakistan.

The accession of these territories spelled the end of independent Baluchistan for good. The loss of Makran isolated Kalat from the sea and forced the Khan to eventually join Pakistan. A political cartoon in March 1948 showed the Khan, his arms and legs hacked off, but his body still squirming around.

That month, the Khan of Kalat convened a “secret council” of seven people that included Noori Naseer Khan, who, as a member of the Khan’s family, was serving as governor at the time. In the meeting, a group of diehard nationalists tried to convince the Khan to resist Pakistan’s advances, with force if necessary. Noori Naseer Khan, who was 29 then, warned the council that “the Muslims of India — Pashtuns, Bengalis, Punjabis, Sindhis and Mohajirs — have been pumped up with... and are full of Islam. In the name of Pakistan, they will massacre all of us. Therefore, under duress, I accede to Pakistan.” By the end of March 1948, Pakistan wielded control over all of the Khan’s territory.

Even after Pakistan’s annexation of Kalat, the insults continued. In 1953, the Pakistan Petroleum Company dis-

covered natural gas in Sui, a town in eastern Baluchistan. For most of Pakistan, the discovery was a big boon: Within ten years, residents in major Pakistani cities were enjoying gas stovetops and furnaces. In the capital of Islamabad today, gas is even cheaper than electricity. Meanwhile, the gas flow only exacerbated the perception the Baluch felt about their second-class status. It took 33 years before gas was piped into Quetta. "And that was only because we have a big cantonment and the [Command and] Staff College is in Quetta," said Akhtar Mengal. To this day, residents in Sui have no access to piped gas.

According to Yusuf Musti Khan, a Baluchi and the Secretary General of the leftist National Workers' Party, the Pakistani government considers Baluchistan a colony more than an integrated, federal unit. "And Pakistan's geopolitical importance is only because of Baluchistan's geopolitical importance," he said. Besides the natural gas fields in Sui and the port in Gwadar, Islamabad is considering two pipelines that would traverse Baluch territory. One, commonly known as TAP, would run from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan and into Pakistan. The other, referred to as IPI, would run from Iran through Pakistan and into India. The government contends that a large percentage of projected revenues would go toward paving roads, building schools and delivering clean water to the undeveloped parts of Baluchistan.

Akhtar Mengal doesn't believe a word of it. "We will oppose all foreign investments which can only take away our resources for the benefit of Islamabad or Punjab, especially those which can turn the Baluch into minority [in their own province]," he explained. "And no one will give any guarantee of their security."

LAST AUGUST, Pakistani security forces killed Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, the 79-year-old chief of the Bugti tribe. Since early 2006, Bugti had been fighting the Pakistani army with a private army of 5,000 loyal tribesmen in the mountains of eastern Baluchistan. "Bugti wanted to be a warlord," a Colonel in Quetta, told me. "He and the other sardars are enemies of this country."

But most Baluchis didn't see it that way. Bugti was an icon for the nationalists, a man whose face, bearded and bespectacled, had taken on near-mythical, Che Guevara-like proportions. He had been a former Governor and Chief Minister of Baluchistan. Moreover, he was an intellectual who often entertained guests with debates about philosophy and literature. He got a kick out of peddling myths to wide-eyed foreign correspondents — such as the one that he went to Oxford or that he killed his first man at age 11, both of which are false but appear regularly in stories about him. One journalist who braved the dangerous journey to meet Bugti in his mountain redoubt found him reading a recent issue of *The Economist*. The day after his death, the editor of the Lahore-based *The Daily Times* wrote, "A pall of gloom has descended over Pakistan that will not lift in a hurry. This is the biggest

blunder committed by the military since the execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto."

Amanullah Kanrani, the Information Secretary of Bugti's political party, Jamhoori Watan Party (JWP), told me that the army killed the only sardar who was actually willing to negotiate with the government. "Nawab sahib was not fighting against Pakistan," Kanrani said. "He wanted maximum provincial autonomy for the satisfaction of his people."

I asked why Bugti needed a 5,000-man army to do this.

"This armed force was established to fight his tribal enemies and to get benefits from gas companies who would otherwise never stick to their agreements." Bugti died repeating the slogan, *Sahil, wa Saheil, Haqiqiane*, or "Coast, Resources and Control for the People." "The government has foisted itself on this war," Kanrani added, "We are defending ourselves and our resources. The control of the resources in [the gas-rich districts of] Dera Bugti and Kohlu, as well as Gwadar, must be given to the Baluch people."

Bugti's son, Jamil Bugti, told me that his father's death was "a very clear signal to everyone that Baluchis should form their own nation." He said, "I don't see any progress...coming from the Gwadar port. Baluch will become minorities in their own land. After all those mega-roads are built, the Baluch will still be there with their donkey carts. This is a business adventure of the colonial power — 'either you submit or we will treat you like we treated Akbar Khan Bugti.'"

Baluchistan burned for days after Bugti's death. Thousands of rioters spilled into the streets of Quetta chanting "Death to Pakistan" and stomping on portraits of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, who is commonly known as *Quaid-i-Azam*, or the Great Leader. Hundreds of people were arrested and several dozen died. Flights and rail service to and from Quetta were cancelled, and roads were blocked. In Gwadar, protesters burned the office of Pakistani International Airlines, ransacked the Pakistan Muslim League office, and torched a life-size effigy of Musharraf. To heap insult on Musharraf, demonstrators soaked the effigy's crotch with water, suggesting he'd lost control of both his country and his bladder.

Punjabis became targets of rage. In Quetta, their shops were vandalized and they feared leaving their homes. Reports circulated of checkpoints, manned by the BLA, where motorists were being stopped and asked their ethnicity. A sure fate awaited those who answered "Punjabi." When I asked Akhtar Mengal, whose hatred for the Pakistani army seems boundless, about the BLA, he quipped, "Our BLA is an organization against the PLA — the Punjab Liberation Army. The [Pakistan] army is the PLA." Last March, at a serene camping spot beside an

oasis an hour outside of Quetta, gunmen shot and killed three picnickers after finding out that they were Punjabis. In the weeks after Bugti's death, two Punjabi students were shot in the Shehbaz Town neighborhood of Quetta as they walked home from school.

"We are fighting the Punjabi establishment, its policies, and its terrorism," Mohyeddin Baluch, Chairman of the Baluch Students Organization, told me. On the day of Bugti's death, Mohyeddin issued a statement calling for civil disobedience across Baluchistan. "We don't accept any law of the state," he said. When I asked him if this meant he belonged to the BLA, he replied, "Ideologically, we support the insurgents. But they are struggling with their arms and our ideology is only political. Where we agree is in our demand for a free Baluch state." The army silenced an aging rebel when it killed Akbar Khan Bugti, but in the process it may have fostered the most militant generation of Baluch nationalists yet.

Another unforeseen result of Bugti's death was the reemergence of the Khan of Kalat, whose role had previously been marginal. But in late September and again in early October, Aga Suleiman Dawood, the 42-year-old descendent of Naseer Khan the Great, called forth all of the Baluchi sardars from Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. "We have to sort out our home," he told me. "We have been like a herd of sheep without a shepherd." The jirgas' decision was to present a case before the International Court of Justice in The Hague, Netherlands, explaining how Pakistan robbed the Baluch of their own state.

"We were never supposed to be part and parcel of Pakistan," Dawood said after taking a drag on the cigarette he held between his meaty fingers. He stressed that the treaty of accession signed on March 31, 1948, between Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Ahmed Yar Khan, the Khan of Kalat and Dawood's own grandfather, stipulated that "nothing in this instrument affects the continuance of [the Khan's] sovereignty in and over this state." Said Dawood, "We are sitting on gold and any time we speak up and ask for due compensation, we get a bloody spanking. We didn't come to Pakistan for this. Now we need to see how strong the Baluch nation is. It's eyeball to eyeball."

I asked Dawood which, out of all of Baluchistan's problems, worried him the most.

He took one final drag from his cigarette and smashed the butt into an ashtray.

"Gwadar."

I SPENT SEVERAL HOURS at the Home and Tribal Affairs Department in Quetta one morning before finally receiving the necessary paperwork for my trip to Gwadar. Foreign visitors require a Non-Objection Certificate, or NOC. The NOC has two purposes: one, for the

visitor's own protection (since everyone, even the government, agrees that the hinterlands of Pakistan can be pretty dodgy); and two, to alert the intelligence agencies that an inquisitive foreigner might be on the way. The bottom of the single page letter listed all the receiving parties: the District Police Officer, Gwadar; the Sector Commander ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence); the Sector Commander, Military Intelligence; the Chief of Staff, Headquarters 12 Corps; the Joint Director General, Intelligence Bureau; the DIG Police (Special Branch); and the Personal Secretary to the Home Secretary. Pretty serious lineup.

The following day, I left Quetta and flew to Karachi, where I met a well dressed and slightly anxious representative from the Gwadar Port Implementation Authority (GPIA). The GPIA is responsible for making sure that the port gets up and running on schedule. I asked the man what he made of suggestions that Gwadar could be the "next Dubai" — the desert oasis of free trade in the United Arab Emirates that is tricked out with mega-malls, man-made island resorts, and two indoor ski slopes. He said he hoped it would happen, but cautioned that "this will take some time. Dubai took 30 years — and they had oil money and no political pressure."

So far, China has covered the bulk of Gwadar's expenses. It provided most of the initial \$250 million needed to construct Phase One of the port, as well as dredging the harbor and building two berths. To do so, 600 Chinese engineers moved to Gwadar. "Their role has been comprehensive," a Karachi-based shipping magnate told me. "[The Chinese] brought all their own labor — from engineers to bathroom scrubbers. They aren't even letting the Baluch sweep the floors, citing 'security concerns.'" In return, Baluch nationalists blame the Chinese for cooperating with Islamabad's "colonialist" policy in Baluchistan. Over the past two years, the BLA has launched several attacks on Chinese workers in Baluchistan, including a massive car bombing in Gwadar in May 2004 that killed three Chinese engineers.

China's involvement in Gwadar also concerns some in the United States. Once the port is up and running, China's economic profile will expand further by its improved access to markets in the Middle East. Plus, it will provide the Chinese with a listening post in the region and give them a naval presence in the Indian Ocean. In January 2005, *The Washington Times* reported on a document sponsored by Net Assessment, the Pentagon's office of future-oriented strategies, which stated that China is "adopting a 'string of pearls' strategy of bases and diplomatic ties stretching from the Middle East to southern China that includes a new naval base under construction at the Pakistani port of Gwadar." The *Times* added that "many Pentagon analysts believe...that China will use its power to project force and undermine U.S. and regional security."

Eventually, I asked the GPIA representative how

“political pressure” had affected Gwadar’s development up until now.

“Not at all,” he said. “True, many things are still lacking. There are no hospitals, clinics or schools. But people of this area seem to be very happy. The price of their land has gone up, job opportunities have increased, and business had gotten better for shopkeepers. They know this will be good for them.”

“Aren’t the sardars telling them something different?”

At this point, a naval officer entered the room and joined the conversation. He answered my question: “The locals want this port very much.” Gwadar, he added, is a “different ballgame” from the rest of Baluchistan, because the tribal system in the coastal areas is weak and the sardars have little power. The officer narrowed his eyes. “The trouble in Baluchistan is because of an international dimension. There are outside hands helping the ‘rebels.’” Some allege that the CIA and RAW, India’s intelligence agency, are fomenting the insurgency. “Why are these people fighting their proxy war in my country?”

I TRAVELED TO GWADAR by road from Karachi. The trip took eight hours on the recently paved Makran Coastal Highway. Soon after we entered Baluchistan, the landscape changed dramatically, from the fertile Indus River valley to desolate desert with an occasional palm tree. Even gas pumps disappeared; “stations”



The Makran Coastal Highway winds through hundreds of miles of desert and dunes.

hereon consisted of 55-gallon drums stacked behind a bucket-and-hose contraption for straining crud out of the petrol. Dust storms raced across the flat expanses and covered the palm fronds in ash-like sand.

As we neared Gwadar, billboards appeared on either side of the road. They advertised neighborhoods with names like “Golden Palms” and “White Pearl City.” One showed a big arrow pointing to a desalination plant. (Majid Sohrabi, the nazim, called this “a lie. They aren’t building it. They are killing us with this disease-filled water.”) Another billboard pointed the way to the new international airport under construction.

None of the advertised business centers or shopping malls were actually there. Driving into Gwadar made me think we were entering some anonymous and long-since deserted industrial wasteland in the former Soviet Union, perhaps the site of a nuclear test or a chemical spill. Giant, arachnid-looking cranes loomed on the horizon. Goats rooted through the piles of garbage littering either side of the road. On one building, some graffiti spelled out “BLA.” Bleached from the sun and battered by sandstorms, the billboards made for a drab welcome.

SHAKEEL AHMED BALUCH is a tall, but unimposing man in his forties with a pencil-width gap between his front teeth and a soft, nasally voice. He is the Deputy Secretary General of the National Party, the only Baluch-based political organization that’s not either fighting the government or calling for an independent Baluchistan. Over dinner one night at the Sadaf Resort in Gwadar, he told me that Pakistan can be a “very viable” nation and federation if the smaller provinces, especially Baluchistan, are given more autonomy. But his job is becoming increasingly difficult by the day. “We are trying to convince our people to be Pakistanis, but the military’s actions are only creating more and more hatred,” he said. “Islamabad is throwing us against a wall.”

A half dozen members of the National Party, including Majid Sohrabi and Jabbar, the former BSO activist from Sohrabi’s office, joined us at the Sadaf. The older politicians spoke in loud voices, often repeated their mantra of working within the boundaries of Pakistan to end Baluchistan’s woes; the younger ones looked on, unconvinced. “We believe in this federation,” Shakeel told me on numerous occasions. The tone of his voice sounded tired and staid; his words, empty.

As the night went on, I inched my chair toward Akram, a young, skinny journalist in his early twenties with very dark skin, a bulbous nose, large lips and coarse hair. He chewed on his lower lip and looked bored. His features are characteristic of Makranis, those who are native to Baluchistan’s coastal region. He speaks Baluchi and Urdu fluently, and is a citizen of Pakistan, but he looks African. “Originally, Makranis were inhabitants of Northern Africa – Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia,”

a long-time resident informed me. "They came to this region as slaves." (This claim is disputed by some.) Makranis are traditionally fishermen; many living in Pakistan have brothers and sisters living in Oman or Iran. That very night, Akram was looking forward to the next-day arrival of his friend from Muscat, the capital of Oman.

Akram talked below the din of white noise coming from the politicians and echoed the frustration and anger of young Baluchis everywhere. I asked him how he reacted when he heard the news of Akbar Khan Bugti's death. "I wanted to grab the government's neck," he said. Soon after the news broke, he took his notebook and went out into the streets to cover the developing riots for his newspaper. He stayed out all day, listening to local firebrands chant down the Pakistani army and watching buildings and tires smolder in clouds of black smoke. "But I didn't actually take part in any of the vandalism," he said. After three days of riots and strikes, Anti-Terrorism Task Force personnel rolled through the streets in Armored Personnel Carriers. Akram said he realized then that Baluchistan "should be a state separate from Pakistan."

Shakeel looked over at me with the sad expression of someone who's begun to accept his own irrelevancy.

I STOOD on top of *Koh-i-Batel*, the hammerhead-shaped tip of Gwadar that juts out into the Arabian Sea and protects vessels anchored in the bay, and looked west to see Iran. *Koh-i-Batel*, which in Baluchi means "small fishing boat mountain," rises hundreds of feet and creates a plateau, edged on all sides by steep cliffs. If you look east, you can watch the port being built. A barbed and chain-link fence surrounds the complex, with military checkpoints stationed around the perimeter. Inside the fence, trucks motored up and down the wide, empty streets that criss-cross the facility at perfect angles. At the edge of the water were a handful of hulking, orange cranes.

Later, we approached one checkpoint manned by a group of young men, two of them holding MP5s, one clutching a clipboard with a list of cleared persons, and one gripping a thick pole that, when raised, allowed motorists to pass. None of them were Baluchis and they weren't very busy: less than 20 cars passed through this particular check post per day, with our truck accounting for half those instances. Still, the same handful of soldiers insisted on quizzing us each time. When we passed through on the last day I was there after a series



Gwadar's main bazaar

of questions, a 26-year-old Baluchi sitting in our back seat snapped: "Fucking Punjabis! Who are they to ask me where I am going? I am a Baluch. This is my city!"

In the harbor opposite the port side, part of the beach is reserved for boatbuilding. The skeletons of several unfinished boats laid up on the dunes; young boys played cricket and soccer on the hard, wet sand closer to the surf. Trash piled up all along either side of the road, like inflatable bumpers in a bowling alley. On a small strip of beach, five plots of well watered and trashless grass were surrounded by a thigh-high rope with a sign attached, reminding pedestrians that the park is "Women and Children Only." Directly behind the grassy patch were the main offices of the Gwadar Development Authority.

Inside, a city planner admitted that all the trash posed some "environmental concerns" and that, "without a clean beach, you can't build a resort." (This didn't deter him from following this comment up with one comparing Gwadar to some of the most exquisite beach resorts on the Mediterranean.) I asked him what he planned to do with the fishermen and the shipbuilders when the expected millions of people started arriving. "The fishing harbors will be moved — specific locations have already

been appointed for them," he said. "Luckily, the fishermen are happy."

But Shakur, a career fisherman who scrapped his business a year ago, didn't look happy. A slender man with a dartboard face that suggested an adolescence spent battling acne, Shakur said that "nobody likes the idea [of moving the fishermen]. The market is here in town. Why would we want to go across the bay?" In the meantime, big fishing enterprises from Karachi are moving into local waters and crowding out smaller fishermen. "Generations of fishermen are being forced to sever their roots," he said. "Many of us are leaving to seek new work."

Shakur recently started a construction business, but that, too, is slow. What about all projects coming to Gwadar? "There are a lot of projects, but the contracts are being given to outsiders," he said. So for now, he takes anything he can get. When we spoke, he was building a playground and a couple of table-tennis courts for a children's park. In all, Shakur thinks Gwadar is an exercise in deception. "We didn't even know that a 'Master Plan' existed for Gwadar until recently," he said. "But Punjabis have been studying it for years, so they know the value of the land better than we do." People have already earned "billions of rupees" in Gwadar, Shakur said. Few of them, he added, were Baluch. They've been too busy waiting for the electricity.

LATER THAT NIGHT, Shakeel and I had one last conversation. The lights flickered on and off, sometimes for

a minute, sometimes for ten. The darkness accentuated the swishing sound of the waves in the background.

"You know what my favorite place is in the world?" Shakeel asked.

"No. What?"

"Daytona Beach," he said with a big grin. He pantomimed sipping an umbrella drink.



A Makrani boy in Gwadar

Shakeel admitted that he faced a crisis, both as a politician and a father: how to stay in touch with the Baluchi youth. Jabbar and Akram represent the next generation of National Party leaders, but their ideas about Baluchistan and its place in Pakistan are radically different from his own. Meanwhile, one of his sons is a member of BSO, whose politics, Shakeel said, are "much more extreme than mine."

Shakeel guaranteed that if Musharraf didn't hand over greater autonomy to the provinces, "there won't be any peace and Musharraf won't be able to do what he wants to do in Gwadar." He paused a moment, then added, "Plus, the National Party won't be able to control the youth."

"Do you really believe that Baluchistan has a future in Pakistan?"

A donkey brayed loudly into the dark, swishing night. "I do, but time is running short," he said. "I am afraid that if I keep believing it, people will stop listening to me." □

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