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The Baloch rebellion at a turning point?

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On December 20th, 2023, Sarfraz Bangulzai alias Murid Baloch, a key ‘commander’ of the Baloch National Army (BNA), along with 70 other companions, announced his [surrender](#) during a press conference in Quetta, the provincial capital of Balochistan. The event is remarkable [since it was](#) ‘the first time a top-ranking separatist leader has surrendered to security forces.’ Some experts claim that there are [emerging rifts](#) within the Baloch rebel movement. It appears that Pakistani authorities seek to [instrumentalise](#) rifts within the Baloch groups. It is argued here that one of the authorities’ tools is to play on an assumed social cleavage among both the rank and file and the leadership of the Baloch rebel groups, for field commanders tend to belong to the lower middle class, while the leadership belongs to wealthy families forced to life in exile abroad.

The BNA is [known](#) for attacking both the Pakistani state and Chinese interests in Balochistan and beyond. The rebel group [came into being](#) after the amalgamation of the Baloch Republican Army (BRA) and the United Baloch Army (UBA) [on January 11th, 2022](#). At the same time, the BNA also [joined](#) the Baloch Raji Ajoi Sangar (BRAS), an operational alliance of several armed Baloch groups. Formed on November 10, 2018, the BRAS [functions](#) as an umbrella organisation. Besides the BNA, the grouping comprises the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), the Baloch Republican Guards (BRG), and the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA) from the Sindh province. These groups have resisted the Pakistani state and its security forces for decades.

As outlined in an earlier [SADF publication](#), Balochistan recently experienced increased rebel activity, especially [since](#) the BRAS coalition was formed.¹ The latest [driving factor](#) of ‘the escalating violence in the region is linked with intensified activities by the Pakistani military² and the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI)’ and the subsequent resistance by armed Baloch groups. The [Baloch people](#) ‘feel exploited and deprived from the benefits obtained from the use of their provincial resources, as well as politically marginalized by the Pakistani state.’ This was further enforced through the emergence of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor/CPEC (Wolf, 2019), leading to an influx of Chinese companies and workers into Balochistan.

Today, Pakistani authorities are describing the surrender of Bangulzai and his affiliates as a ‘[historic day](#)’ – and a major success of counter terrorism operations. This is relevant since the leader and founder of the BNA, ‘Gulzar Imam alias Shambay³, was arrested in a high-profile intelligence-based operation by the security forces’ earlier in [April 2023](#). According to [Asif Channer](#), from The Nation, the arrest of Gulzar Imam dealt a serious blow to the insurgency, particularly to the BNA. Adnan Aamir, from Nikkei Asia, even [reports](#) that with Bangulzai’s capitulation, the BNA could dissolve.⁴ [Some observers](#) see the latest developments as the beginning of the end of the Baloch rebellion. As [stated](#) by analyst Abdul Basit, from the Singapore-based S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, ‘Imam’s arrest is a great achievement at the tactical level for the Pakistani security agencies.’ One should also assume that Imam’s arrest and Bangulzai surrender will [help](#) the Pakistani authorities ‘to neutralise BNA’s network in Balochistan with the help of the information received from him through interrogation.’ This may lead to the surrender of members of other Baloch groups.

¹ Asif Channer [points out](#) that ‘[t]he formation of BRAS in 2018 marked a shift in the dynamics of violence in Balochistan, with leadership and control transitioning from feuds to commoners.’

² This also includes a boost in troop levels of both the Pakistani Army and para-military forces in Balochistan.

³ [According to Abdul Basit](#), ‘Imam is without a doubt one of the three most influential commanders of the Baloch separatist insurgency — the others being the BLA chief Bashir Zaib and BLF chief Allah Nazar — and was quite instrumental in the formation of BRAS.’ [Pakistani sources](#) are claiming that Gulzar Imam Shambay’s arrest ‘encouraged others, including his second-in command Sarfraz Bangulzai to surrender before the State.’

⁴ An assessment reflected by Asif Channer, who [states](#) that ‘[h]is [Bangulzai] surrender carries the potential to disrupt the BNA’s operations in key regions, providing law enforcement agencies with valuable intelligence and weakening the overall militant infrastructure.’

It is far too early for that for such assessments. Within this line of argumentation, Aamir [stresses](#) that ‘while the high-profile surrender means one group that threatened key economic interests is off the table, it does not mean an end to a two-decade insurgency.’ Regarding anti-China activities by Baloch groups, Pakistani analyst Fakhar Kakakhel [points out](#) that ‘[t]hreats against Chinese interests were not entirely dependent on Sarfraz Bangulzai’, ... ‘the threat to Chinese interests in Balochistan will remain intact.’ Also, as indicated above, the BNA is only one of numerous armed Baloch groups within the broader alliance of the BRAS. For example, the Majeed Brigade, perhaps one of the most lethal Baloch groups belonging to the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), remains active.⁵ It is also not clear how the leadership turbulence in the BNA is affecting the BRAS. Certain tensions among the political leadership and the field commanders within the armed groups, as well as a certain level of distrust between the groups, are undisputable. However, that is not an unknown phenomenon within such a diverse landscape of rebel groups in general – and among the Baloch one in particular. History shows that until now, the Baloch were able to manage internal frictions and continue the armed struggle against Pakistan. According to [Zia Ur Rehman](#), from the Dawn, other observers are ‘sceptical of how much the arrest or elimination of one or two leaders would impact the overall Baloch insurgency.’ Interestingly, Basit [points out](#) that ‘[t]he militants associated with the current wave of insurgency are ideologically motivated, not on the basis of tribes.’ In other words, the family and tribal connections among the Baloch rebels, traditionally determining the leader- and followership within the respective groups, are losing significance. As such, one can argue that the groups starting to be more resilient towards to loss of leadership figures.

Islamabad as well as quasi-ally Beijing are instrumentalising this occasion for political and diplomatic purposes,⁶ foremost to attack India. From a Pakistani point

⁵ This is significant since one of the most remarkable [attacks against Chinese facilities](#) targeted the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) building in Karachi on June 29, 2020. The BLA described the assault against the PSX building as a self-sacrificing attack, marking a new level of violence in the context of Baloch insurgency.

⁶ The fact that the announcement of Bangulzai surrendering took place in the Sikandar Jamali Auditorium Civil Secretariat Quetta of the government of Balochistan must be seen as an indicator that the whole event was a staged spectacle. That the Caretaker Provincial Information Minister [Jan Achakzai](#) was present at this occasion confirms this. Caretaker Provincial Minister for Home and Tribal Affairs Captain (R) Zubair Ahmed Jamali was present as well. It is argued here that Bangulzai’s statements are coordinated with the Pakistan’s state representatives.

of view, it will be used as part of Islamabad’s public rhetoric to discredit arch enemy New Delhi as well as to distract from its own involvement in state sponsorship of terrorism (Wolf, 2017). That Beijing provides diplomatic support for Islamabad’s support to terrorism is also not new, as described in another [SADF publication](#). Now China is also accusing India of ‘[double standards](#)’ in fighting terrorism. This must be seen as another step of Beijing’s growing [aggressive posture](#) towards New Delhi.

Until now, blaming a “foreign hand” for the rebellion in Balochistan proved a fruitless distraction from both the causes and consequences of the unrest. So far, there are no signs neither by the political nor the military leadership - the real decision-makers in Pakistan – regarding a change to repressive approaches towards the Baloch people and their region. Independent analyst [Kiyya Baloch](#) concludes that ‘[t]he Baloch separatist insurgency will continue unless the security-centric approach of the state of Pakistan does not end.’ This is [reflected](#) by the recent Balochi civil society’s March [to Islamabad] against enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, the “genocide” of ethnic Baloch people’, and for the demand for the release of Baloch activists in Pakistani custody. The protest of the Baloch people in the capital was dispersed by the Pakistani state through massive use of force. This provides a grim perspective on the future of Balochistan. It also questions the constructed narrative by “Pakistan’s authorities, echoed by both the domestic media and analysts, of an end to the Baloch rebellion.

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