

## The Plight of Balochi Youth

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### Introduction

'The Sistan-Balochistan province, despite its richness and geographical advantages, is the least developed area of the country'<sup>45</sup> this is how the Governor General of the Provincial Social Department in Balochistan described the region in June 2005. 'We always assumed that the Baloch would attempt to create their own independent state some day, with Soviet support, so it was desirable to keep them as politically weak, disunited, and backward as possible', this is how another official explained the State's relationship with the Balochis<sup>46</sup> under the Pahlavis.

Successive Iranian governments have been engaged in demographic manipulations to systematically reduce the Baloch people to a minority in their own homeland. Among the many repressive policies is the destruction of the homes of poor Baloch people in Balochistan and their displacement. This is done in order to provide non-Baloch workers, especially the security forces, brought into the province with the best land; Government policy has been based on facilitating access for Shi'a and non-Baloch people to purchase land cheaply and set up businesses.

In its 1997 report on the plight of the Baloch Human Rights Watch stated, 'the administrative and political districts were arranged so as to avoid the creation of any Balochi majority provinces, thus preventing locally elected officials'; and 'a systematic plan has been set in motion by the authorities to specify the region by changing the ethnic balance of major Balochi cities such as Zahdan, Iranshahr, Chahbhar and Khash'.<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps the shared border with Afghanistan and Pakistan to the east and warm waters of the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman to the south is an excuse for many of Iran's army garrisons to be permanently stationed in Baloch area, which depicts Balochistan as an army zone. Nevertheless, the militarisation of Baloch areas has been combined with increased human right violations and collective punishment of Baloch civilians. The regime's forces have bombed civilian areas using helicopter gunship, resulting in the deaths of innocent Baloch people in both villages and the mountains.

In addition to many security forces and intelligent agencies, a paramilitary group, 'Mersad' meaning *ambush*, which operates under direct order of Iran's supreme leader Khamanei, is also active in Baloch areas. What differentiates this group from others is its licence to kill. They choose their victims randomly, creating a sense of insecurity in Balochistan, especially among young men. For this group the whole of Balochistan has become a hunting ground. It has been responsible for many shootings and beatings in Balochistan.<sup>48</sup>

But, what is the reality of life for the Balochis? Sistan and Balochistan is the largest province in Iran. Most of the Sistanis are Shi'a and Balochistan predominately Sunni. The population growth in the province is higher than the national average of 1.61% for the 1996-2006 period indicated at 3.4% making it one of the highest birth rates in Iran (4.15% Urban, 2.66% rural).<sup>49</sup> These figures indicate success in reducing and controlling population growth in the majority of the country's regions but can the failure in this region be attributed to poverty and lack of adequate education?

Furthermore, according to the national census of 2006, unlike the general urbanisation trend in the country the population remains rural with over 50% living in villages and 51.61% households comprising of five or

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<sup>45</sup> [http://www.irna.ir/index2.php?option=com\\_news&task=print&code=84042301999102](http://www.irna.ir/index2.php?option=com_news&task=print&code=84042301999102)

<sup>46</sup> Mahmud Khalatbary, Director General of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) in conversation with Selig S. Harrison 1981, pp 159.

<sup>47</sup> Human Rights Watch: Religious and Ethnic Minorities Discrimination in Law and Practice, September 1997 Vol. 9, No 7(E)

<sup>48</sup> From paper presented at Bad Bull, Stuttgart, Germany By Nasser Boladai in a three days conference on 25 November 2006, organised jointly by Evangelic Academy and Kurdish Human Right Organisation-Germany. the conference was held between 24 to 26 November 2006.

<sup>49</sup> The figures are taken from a study by Ehsan Houshmand for issue 57 of Goftogu quarterly journal published March/April 2011 p29-43 – Iran. <http://www.goftogu.net/?id=100&num=57#599>

more people in the province again almost double of the national average.<sup>50</sup>

Of particular importance is the population structure of the region.

<b>Table 1</b> <sup>51</sup>	0-14 years of age %	15-64 years of age %	65 and over %
Overall figure	25.08	69.73	5.19
Sistan and Balochistan	38.85	58.20	2.95

Table 1 demonstrates much higher than average age group of 0-14 year olds and lower than average 65 and over indicating a young population structure and low life expectancy within the region. Of concern is the high 0-14 year old age group pointing towards serious future problems with existing policies.

### **Education**

According to Hamid Reza Haji Babai, the Education Secretary, 70% of students starting school in Iran do not have Farsi as their mother language and do not successfully learn the language after first year in school.<sup>52</sup> He expresses concern that this creates inequality and provides for fewer opportunities in competition with Farsi speaking children.<sup>53</sup>

Literacy rate within the region is also lower than the national average, actually last in the national list (84.61% national average, 68.01% Sistan and Balochistan). According to the figures 32% of the people in the region are illiterate; this increase to 40% in the rural regions.

### **Early years**

Despite Article 15 of the Iranian constitution and Article 27 of the ICCPR, the Ahwaz, Baloch, Kurds, Azerbaijani Turks, and Turkmen face difficulties in exercising their rights to use their own languages, in private and in public. For example, all state schooling in these regions is conducted exclusively in Farsi. As a result, dropout rates are high.

There are several problems facing Baloch children when they start school. First of all, the medium of education is not in their mother language - majority of the children do not speak medium of instruction or do not have a good command of Farsi when they start school. Unable to understand teacher's instruction makes them less enthusiastic learners from beginning. Studying in the mother language makes children more willing to learn as well as making it easier, but for Baloch children language barrier is not the only hurdle in a curriculum which is very ethnocentric and religious centric.

Another problem in Balochistan province and Baloch areas compared to other provinces and regions is lack of school or their poor conditions. Village children have to travel or walk for miles to get to schools with poor or inadequate facilities and families do not have the means to provide for safe transportation. This especially makes it difficult for girls to continue their studies with over 60% dropping out after primary school.<sup>54</sup> Financial and traditional concerns mean that families' limited resources are not spent on education of girls.

### **Higher Education**

The region as one of the most deprived in Iran suffers from inadequate facilities for higher education despite the existence of several universities in the province. These universities are under resourced with lower than standard facilities. The national selection criteria means locals stand a very low chance of acceptance at

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Hamid Reza Haj Babai speaking at a Seminar in November 2009. <http://farhang.barnegar.com/view-467.html>

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,15044682,00.html>

<sup>54</sup> Councillor Rahim Bakhsh Derazehi also a member of High Council of Provinces in an interview with Ati News, 17 September 2011.

<http://www.atynews.com/fa/print/54717>

other universities which yet again reduces the national interaction and access to better education consequently leading to unfair competition in the job market and employment opportunities.

### **Employment**

The country as a whole suffers with inaccurate or untrustworthy employment statistics. A perfect example can be seen in the unemployment figures published for the region in 2001. In these figures 61.6% of the 15-24 year olds were unemployed (national average 33.6%). However, in 2006 the local and national average was published as 23.3%. As far as the region is concerned there are no indicators to explain this massive drop in the space of five years. Industrial units remain well below the national average and no other extraordinary developments have been recorded as far as agriculture, mining or service industries are concerned.<sup>55</sup> Yet, there is general consensus is that unemployment is particularly high in the region and of great concern. Discrimination on the grounds of religion is high with many Sunni Muslims of the region experiencing jobs going to non-local but Shi'a competitors.

The only opportunity is cross border trade and that too is inadequately managed with poor Customs services and fraught with terrorist or drug trafficking concerns.

### **Women**

The discrimination against Baloch women is three fold: ethnic, religious and gender based. Coupled with traditional and cultural prejudices Baloch women have a particularly hard time. Lack of job opportunities for the men means many travel to neighbouring countries for work. This together with the practice of polygamy has resulted in a high number of cases of AIDS being reported among the Baloch women, twice the national average and in children three times the national average.<sup>56</sup> Young Baloch women suffer from lower than average education, little job opportunities –where men are unemployed opportunities for women are even more limited and cultural and traditional biases further hinders their progress in the region.

### **Health**

With a population of 2,405,742 the province only has thirteen health and medical centres including hospitals, with only 2117 beds, which yet again point to the level of discrimination and lack of attention to the needs of the people of the region.

### **Leisure, Culture and Sports**

Little or no attention is paid to the leisure needs of the region. As an example, Abdolaziz Jamshidzahi, a Member of Parliament from the town of Saravan warned the Assembly that while parks in Tehran are paved so as not to dirty the shoes of the children, in his area barefoot children do not even have parks or play spaces.<sup>57</sup>

According to the national statistics the province had three operational cinemas, which by 2006 was reduced to one with seating for 470 people. From the nine swimming pools reported in 2003 by 2006 only four remained open.

### **Conclusion**

The Islamic Republic treats its religious and ethnic minorities as second or third class citizens, a form of apartheid. Systematic discriminatory policies, inequitable access to the country's resources and opportunities, and worse than average economic concerns mean that the Baloch youth is disillusioned and disenfranchised with little or no hope for a better future. Attempts to control their anger and frustration through fear and intimidation such as mass public hangings do not encourage participation in the national

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<sup>55</sup> Ehsan Houshmand for issue 57 of Goftogu quarterly journal – as detailed above

<sup>56</sup> 27 November 2011 - <http://www.zanefarda.ir/1390/09/%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%B2-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%DB%B2-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D9%85%DB%8C/>

<sup>57</sup> 2 March 2011 - <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8912110817>

dialogue.

This situation demonstrates the urgent need of a new social contract that recognises Iran's different ethnic groups such as the Ahwazi Arabs, Azerbaijani Turks, Baloch, Fars, Kurds, Lur and Turkmen as equal in their collective rights and duties. In this millennium, a new scenario of national governance should prevail. The elements of this new system of governance should be harmonious partnership in a republican, liberal, democratic, and secular system with a federal structure and autonomous, provincial governance mechanisms. Such a state system would appropriately address the problems and offer the prospect of a positive new partnership of trust and coexistence. A mechanism based on the acceptance of genuine and justified demands of the constituent groups should generate participation, shared responsibilities, and at the same time offer opportunities to all nations.