

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES: ROHRBACHER'S INEPT BALOCHISTAN MEDDLING PROVOKES PAK REBUKE OF ISI, MI FOR EXTRA-JUDICIAL KILLINGS

On February 8, Congressman Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) held a hearing on Balochistan, which he followed up on February 17 with a resolution calling for an independent Balochistan. As I reported on the hearing, Rohrabacher mispronounced Balochistan so badly during the hearing that one Pakistani newspaper referred to him as "Donna Rohrbacher". As might be expected, having a minor congressman meddle so clumsily in foreign affairs had a horrible immediate fallout, with large anti-US demonstrations in Pakistan developing in response to the independence resolution.

The fact that Rohrabacher is playing petty politics with the fate of a large number of people has not been overlooked in Pakistan. Former Pakistani Foreign Secretary Najmuddin A. Shaikh, writing yesterday in Dawn, had this to say in an opinion piece:

Rohrabacher has had an interest in Afghanistan for the last 30 years. As part of president Reagan's stable of speech writers he takes credit for having Reagan call the Afghan Mujahideen 'freedom fighters' and even for the parallel Reagan drew between America's founding fathers and the Mujahideen. In those days, Pakistan was his favourite country.

Today his attitude towards Pakistan is coloured by what he believes Pakistan is doing in Afghanistan and not by his concern for the Baloch people. Had he been genuinely concerned about Balochistan his star witness should have been Selig Harrison who has long been regarded in the American security establishment as the foremost expert on Balochistan.

That has been my concern as well. Rohrabacher's professed support for the Balochs seems strikingly like the support the Bush administration and Congressional Republicans displayed for the Kurds after the first Gulf War, where the Kurds were encouraged to take on Saddam Hussein, only for the Republicans to then stand by idly while Hussein massacred them. In this case, it appears that Rohrabacher is professing support for the Baloch, but mainly for the way in which this support can weaken the Pakistani government, which he blames for sheltering Taliban insurgents who carry out attacks in Afghanistan and for hiding Osama bin Laden (who was no longer a Freedom Fighter, I guess).

Despite this cynical background, however, the attention generated by Rohrabacher's stunts is having some distinctly positive effects. Writing yesterday at BBC.com, Ahmed Rashid notes:

It took an obscure United States congressman holding a controversial hearing in Washington on the civil war in Balochistan to awaken the conscience of the Pakistani government, military and public.

For years the civil war in Balochistan has either been forgotten by most Pakistanis or depicted as the forces of law and order battling Baloch tribesmen, who are described as "Indian agents".

As Rashid points out, the renewed scrutiny has focused attention on the plight of the Baloch at the hands of the Pakistani intelligence community:

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reported that in 2011 there were 107 new cases of enforced disappearances. The so called "missing" are picked up, tortured, killed and their bodies left by the roadside in what the Baloch call "a kill and dump policy" by state intelligence agencies and the paramilitary Frontier Corps. Thousands of people have disappeared in the past nine years.

Both the Pakistani Parliament and its Supreme Court are now standing up to the intelligence community and calling for accountability on the extra-judicial killings of the Baloch. The Express Tribune reports on Parliament's response:

In an unprecedented move to pacify frayed tempers in Balochistan, a parliamentary panel has asked the country's spy agencies to not overstep their authority.

Baloch insurgents and rights groups have long accused the intelligence agencies of 'wanton killings' in the volatile province in the name of national security.

However, the effectiveness of Wednesday's orders of the National Assembly Standing Committee on Defence to the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Military Intelligence (MI) are yet to be seen as the chiefs of both spy agencies didn't turn up at the session.

The security establishment has always denied that spy agencies are behind enforced disappearances and extra-judicial killings in Balochistan.

Granted, the intelligence agencies did not show up at the hearing, but having the panel address the issue is a significant step forward.

Pakistan's Supreme Court was even more aggressive in calling out the intelligence community:

The displeased Supreme Court gave out a stern message to Inter-Services Intelligence and Military Intelligence on Thursday: "You need to take this out of your mind that you [ISI and MI] are superior and others [civilians] are inferior."

Counsel of ISI and MI Raja Irshad was reprimanded as the Supreme Court remained unsatisfied with the replies submitted to the court today by the agencies in the Adiala missing prisoners' case.

Headed by Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, the three-member bench said that the replies submitted to the court do not justify under which law the civilians were picked up by agencies. "Who gave you the right to hound people?" questioned the chief justice.

"You are so insensitive to the human loss that the families of the missing persons have suffered lately because of you. This is a big allegation against you [ISI and MI] – you abduct people and after some days, their abandoned bodies surface," said Chief Justice Chaudhry.

"You're an arsonist. You have set Balochistan on fire," said Chaudhry while referring to the agencies and the situation in Balochistan. "We ask you time and again and you always tell us stories. Are we here to listen to your stories?"

Ironically, in trying to weaken Pakistan's

government with his hearing and resolution, Rohrabacher appears to have prodded Pakistan into taking responsible action toward ending enforced disappearances and extra-judicial killings in Balochistan. Let us hope that Pakistan's government follows through on this recent spate of rhetoric and ends these deadly repressive acts by ISI and MI.