

1968: A Global Perspective

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Reflections on the Future of the 'National Question' in Pakistan: Politics of Balochistan Popular Liberation Front (BPLF) in 1968

The years 1968-74 were a pivotal period in Pakistan's history. A broad alliance of labor unions, student leaders, ethno-nationalist parties and center-left parties successfully dethroned the US backed regime of dictator General Ayub Khan in 1969 in what might be characterized as a 'national-popular' revolution ushering in an era of hope. However, subsequent struggles over the meanings of socialism and Islam, the nature of the federation, and the National Question, exacerbated by the centralizing tendencies of Pakistani state, led to a series of setbacks for democratic forces in Pakistan. Bengali Muslims in the Eastern half of the country launched a popular revolt against the Central Government and seceded to form the independent Republic of Bangladesh in 1971, organized labor was crushed by the 'socialist' government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto through brute police action in Karachi in 1972, and a military operation was launched in Balochistan Province in 1974 to crush Baloch nationalist demands for political autonomy.

This paper attempts to reflect on the simmering debates around political autonomy and the rights of ethnic minorities in this period by following the career of a clandestine national liberation organization, the Balochistan Popular Liberation Front. BPLF combined classical Marxist-Leninist strategies of revolutionary warfare with demands for greater autonomy for the disenfranchised ethnic groups in Pakistan such as the Baloch. The legendary guerilla leader of BPLF Sher Muhammad Marri alias General Sherov, along with a minority of committed non-Baloch leftist intellectuals and students, believed that this struggle would point the way for resolving the 'National Question' in Pakistan. However, their approach led to divisions within and recriminations from leftist circles in Pakistan where some accused BPLF and its sympathizers of appealing to 'petty bourgeoisie' nationalist sentiments in the pursuit of narrow class interests of Baloch tribal chiefs. In the current context of a simmering insurgency in Balochistan Province, this paper reflects on the abiding challenge that Baloch nationalism presents to an overdeveloped Pakistani state and the repercussions of this challenge for a future imaginary of emancipatory politics.