

## COMMENT 225 - Gwadar protests and the peculiar role of Jamaat-e-Islami in Pakistan

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For nearly a month, the coastal town of Gwadar has been witnessing the emergence of a protest movement called the *Gwadar Ko Huqooq Do Tehreek* ([Give Rights to Gwadar Movement](#)), ‘[considered one of the largest in Baluchistan’s history](#)’. The movement is led by Jamaat-e-Islami (JI). Baluchistan’s General Secretary and religious scholar Maulana Hidayat-ur-Rehman Baloch is [rallying against various issues](#)<sup>1</sup>, from the presence of large illegal fishing trawlers and the ban on locals from engaging on deep-sea trawling to the lack of health facilities, adequate educational centres, and drinking water<sup>2</sup>. In brief, protesters are [demanding the basic rights](#) denied to them by the central government and its subservient provincial administration since the country came into existence. The Baloch feeling of social and economic marginalisation as well as political side-lining gained additional momentum since the launch of the Beijing’s initiated China-Pakistan Economic

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, the following [19 demands](#) were formulated by protesters: (1) End of illegal trawlers, (2) Freedom for fishermen to go to sea (Elimination of special token system), (3) Elimination of unnecessary check-posts on major roads, (4) Closure of wine shops in Gwadar, (5) Elimination of interference in cross-border trade with Iran, (6) Establishment of a university in Gwadar, (7) Appointments on empty seats of education to department’s non-teaching staff, (8) Curtailing the sale of fake medicines, (9) Waivers and subsidies on utility bills, (10) Release of seized cars and boats by the coastguard, (11) Provision of clean drinking water, (12) Priority to locals on employments for development projects, (13) Implementation of the agreement with Dar Bela’s affected, (14) Compensation paid to Expressway affected, (15) Removal of cases on protest leaders and names from the Fourth Schedule, (16) Damages for losses due to storms and illegal trawlers, (17) Removal of DG GDA, DC Gwadar AC Pasni, (18) Implementation of quotas for disabled people, (19) Open Kulki points for transportation of oil and essentials. See also [Javed Baloch \(2021, November 18\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> [According to observers](#), ‘about 100,000 people don’t have access to clean drinking water in Gwadar port town, let alone in other parts of the district’.

Corridor (CPEC), roughly six years ago (Wolf, 2019). For regional communities in Gwadar and beyond, it [becomes increasingly obvious](#) that instead of the promised employments and improved overall living conditions, Chinese development projects (foremost the CPEC) increase socio-economic aberrations (especially the exploitation of local resources without adequate returns for autochthonous populations) and generally deteriorate [living conditions](#). For [experts](#), such massive protests do not come by surprise; however, the composition, timing, and leadership structure of these movement do raise some questions. Here, the following points should be highlighted.

To begin with, it's crucial to notice the thousands of people participating in the "Gwadar rallies", which include not only [women and children](#) (a phenomenon described by observers as an '[unprecedented move](#)') but also '[different segments of society](#)' comprising [fishermen, poor labourers, students](#), civil society activists, lawyers, journalists among others. It's also noteworthy that protesters include not only residents of Gwadar but also [from other urban areas](#) of the homonymous district (such as Turbat, Zamran, Ormara, Pasni, Piskhan) and attracted the support by sympathisers all over the province, calling for a '[Balochistan Solidarity Day](#)'. By monitoring the size and scope of the protests, one can state that we're not witnessing just a short-lived episode of expressed grievances. There are clear signs of a larger socio-political movement with [nation-wide](#) dimension. In other words, the '[Gwadar rights movement](#)' doesn't just reflect a temporary mounting frustration over regional nuisances by a resident community. The Gwadar protest stands for a general resistance against the malfunctions of an (at best) semi-democratic political-administrative system within a '[disaggregated rentier state](#)', foremost Islamabad's [top-down development model 'marred by criminality and incompetence'](#).

However, the peculiar aspect of these protests - which actually emerged from within a deeply entrenched [secular rather than religiously](#) dominated environment - is that they seem to be led by the JI, one of the country's oldest and largest Islamist political organisations. There is a need to shed light on the role of the JI within the movement, for it seems obvious that it obtained a central leadership position. Why and how this could happen? What is the motivation behind the JI's involvement in an apparently regional protest? The JI is known to collaborate with the country's

establishment – as one “who toes the nationalist Pakistani line”. Yet the Islamist organisation ‘[has been the face of the movement since its inception](#)’. This can be interpreted in different ways.

The JI (willing or unwillingly) serves the interests of the central government in monitoring the growing discontent and handling protests. One should assume that the JI did not really loosen its bonds with the authorities and continues to be instrumental for Islamabad. There are several indications supporting such a view.

Firstly, Pakistani authorities were immediately willing to enter in negotiations with Maulana Hidayat-ur-Rehman and have already held [several rounds of talks](#) with him. By contrast,<sup>3</sup> traditional Baloch leaders like ‘veteran politician’ [Baloch] Muttahida Mahaz’s (BMM) president Mir Yousuf Masti Khan are being arrested ‘[on the charge of making a “provocative and anti-state” speech](#)’ in Gwadar. It goes without saying that both the intensive interaction with Maulana and Kahn’s arrest strengthen the JI’s position within the protest movement. Moreover, by ‘[condemning the arrest of the BMM leader](#)’, the JI once more presents itself as an actor acting for the wellbeing of the Baloch people.

Secondly, JI leader [Maulana stressed](#) in an exclusive interview with *Gwadar Pro* that

*‘China is our friend and we are not at all against China, China-led development in Gwadar or China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Gwadar protest and sit-in is not aversive to Gwadar Port being operated by the China Overseas Port Holding Company, rather it aims at seeking our right to live a peaceful life that every Pakistani deserves’.*

This siding with Beijing (which claims that Gwadar protests as any form of criticism on China are ‘[purely fake news](#)’) is quite surprising since according to [analysts](#)<sup>4</sup> there is a clear and causal relationship between current protests and Chinese developments initiatives and other engagements (like in the [fishing sector](#))

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<sup>3</sup> [According to Behram Baloch](#), reporting for the Dawn newspaper, there are sources claiming that there were also attempts by the police to arrest to Maulana but could not do it because of the massive presence of protesters.

<sup>4</sup> For more details and references, see Wolf, S.O. (2019). *The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative: Concept, Context and Assessment* (Cham: Springer).

in the area. One can wonder how far the JI is really representing local interests. Another example of how Maulana attempts to take off the tip of the movement regards the narrowing down in number of ‘major’ demands ([to only two \[action against ‘trawler mafia’ and cross-border trade with Iran\] from the initial 19](#)) to be addressed by the central government so as to calm the protests.

A different perspective on the JI’s involvement in the Gwadar protests reads the action involved as an attempt to win political capital by adopting a critical position towards the central government. If so, instead of being concerned about Baloch interests the JI identified the plight as an opportunity to recapture lost space in national politics. Concretely, the JI wishes to gain additional leverage within the [struggle over dominance of the country’s Islamist landscape](#). It seems that in the last years the JI has lost influence vis-à-vis other religious hardliners, foremost the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). The no longer banned TLP was even able to strike a major (prestigious) [deal](#) with the country’s establishment so as to lift restrictions on the organisation, making it the spearhead of Pakistan’s extreme political Islamist mainstream. By contrast, the JI have yet to benefit much from the rapidly growing religious fanaticism in the country – which received an extraordinary push through the [military takeover](#) of Afghanistan by the Taliban. However, by becoming more engaged in regional politics and concerns, the JI was already able to re-emerge as a political force in the electoral arena. This was shown in the last [Karachi cantonment polls](#). This is assumably in Islamabad’s interest as well, since the JI resurgence serves as a counterbalance to the TLP’s rising power. All this ultimately causes splits within the “Islamist camp”.

In sum, despite the JI being able to capture, at least temporarily, the leadership of the Gwadar protest movements, one should doubt that this will translate into sustainable political weight, neither at the provincial nor at the national level. As indicated above, traditionally the Baloch people are averse towards ultraconservative religious views of the kind represented by the JI and likeminded groupings. The JI’s attempt to hijack or manipulate the cause of Balochistan for the sake of an advantage vis-à-vis its competitors may prove to have been a wrong move.

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