

The News International

Forty-eight hours in Balochistan: the unknown

A hundred beats

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Part II

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Babu Sumalani is twenty-eight years old. On September 22 he left his house in Quetta to go for a walk in a nearby park. He is a university graduate who studied sociology and politics in college and who dreamt of returning to school to do a Masters in English. Like many of the young men of his generation Babu was disturbed by the politics of his country. The troika of violence, injustice and poverty troubled him deeply but he saw opportunities for change and felt that if he invested himself in the politics of his community he would be fulfilling his role as a concerned and responsible citizen. Babu does not belong to one of the big Baloch tribes; he is an ordinary man, but a proud one, strongly connected to his Baloch identity. He joined the Baloch National Party (BNP) and was a committed political activist. On September 22 at approximately 3:30 pm, Babu Sumalani was disappeared.

He was forcibly picked up and bundled into a car. When Babu failed to return home, his family went to the neighborhood police station. There was no record of his arrest. His family has not seen him since.

In Urdu we now have a word for men like Babu, we call them 'la pata' or the unknown. Our language has made space to acknowledge the disappeared. It had to, there are too many cases to ignore. Human Rights Commission Pakistan estimates that more than 3,000 men have been disappeared by security and intelligence agencies from Balochistan alone. Their figures are conservative – some argue that the number is closer to 8,000. The men who are picked up and made unknown are activists belonging to the BNP, the Baloch Student Organization (BSO); they are labour leaders, writers, journalists, tribals, and political activists.

The grisly use of disappearances, never before known in Pakistan, started with the War on Terror. It started when the state began to see its citizens as dangerous, too dangerous to deserve fairness before the law. Disappearances are favoured by authoritarian states for two

reasons: first, they silence those who dare to speak out and secondly; the fear that disappearances generate permeates the community at large. It terrorizes citizens with the possibility that they too may be made unknown. It grips men with the uncertainty of risk -- should they continue to resist? Is their protest worthwhile? -- So that they begin to self regulate, to self-censor in the fear that their voices may be heard.

Too many people in Balochistan have relatives who have been disappeared. The very term 'disappeared' comes from Argentina where in the late 1970s an estimated 30,000 people were disappeared by the military junta that lorded over the country. The de facto President from 1976-81, General Jorge Rafael Videla, defending the junta against claims that it had kidnapped thousands of Argentine citizens, smirked in a press conference 'They are neither dead nor alive, they disappeared'.

In Balochistan, I hear too many things that remind me of Argentina. I hear rumours that men have been taken over the mountains in helicopters and thrown out so that their bodies may never be found. They may just be rumours, but the very suggestion is unsettling. In Argentina they used to do the same, but over water. They called the flights 'vuelos de la muerte' or death flights.

Disappearances do not happen in countries where citizens have access to the state, they do not happen in places where the government is accountable to the people, no. They happen in states of secret terror, states where the government's narrative runs counter to that of its citizens. With invisible prisoners, the state is able to claim a façade of normalcy. The victims have been vanished; there is no evidence that anything is wrong! Everything is normal, business carries on as usual and parties both domestic and international feel comfortable in interacting with a state that would otherwise seem very scary.

Babu's family are like ghosts. They are living in two worlds, that of the living and that of the dead. How do you accept a loss but refrain from mourning it, choosing firmly to believe in life in the overwhelming presence of nothing? Babu's mother, an elderly woman who only speaks Balochi, is still crying for her son. She says he didn't do anything, she says in between her tears that Babu is an innocent man. But she raises her head and stiffens herself, 'If he did something, why didn't they charge him? Take him to court and put him on trial? Why didn't they do that?' I have no answers for Babu's mother, but she's not speaking to me -- she's speaking to those who took him 'But not this, they shouldn't have done this. It's illegal,

it's unjust'.

The family of an unknown bears multiple losses. They lose a loved one, they lose the hope of his mission or his activism, they lose their calm and sense of peace, they lose financial stability when a breadwinner is taken from them, and they lose good standing. They lose their reputation because in order to cover their tracks the establishment insists that the disappeared man ran away to join some nefarious organization like Al Qaeda or is on the run from the law because he is a perverse or deranged criminal. Torture is not only physical; it is psychic and emotional too.

But the one thing people confronted with disappearances don't lose is social solidarity. Babu's brother tells me that they are not a political family, they don't even vote, but nowadays the children of the house -- Babu's nieces and nephews -- come running to ask their uncle when they can next go to the Press Club to hold a vigil, they ask when they can protest and they show him placards they've made with their uncle's photograph on them.

On Eid day, the women of Quetta held a protest for the disappeared. Mothers, sisters, wives, and children of the unknown took to the streets with photographs of the men that were unlawfully taken from them and they spoke loudly for their release and safe return. These women didn't spend Eid the way the rest of us did, stuffing our faces and buying new clothes, they spent it in the bravest way possible -- by demanding an end to injustice. They reminded me of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina. This is a good memory. The Mothers, a diverse organization of Argentine women related to the disappeared, wear white scarves to symbolize peace and they go every Thursday afternoon, as they have done for over thirty years, to the Plaza de Mayo in central Buenos Aires for a half hour walk around the plaza. They hold photographs of the children that were abducted and hold signs demanding their return. In 1999 the Mothers were awarded a United Nations Prize for Peace Education. Though they do not consider the current Argentine government hostile, the Mothers continue to gather and protest the disappearances of the past and remember those who have never returned.

Hebe de Bonafini, one of the founders of the group explained her ability to overcome her fear and take part in such public protests against the violent junta. She said when she thought of her children who had been disappeared she felt 'tigers growing inside me.'

Now there are tigers growing in Balochistan too.

Balochistan is a land of many secrets, of much untold suffering. Babu's family continues to pray for his return and persists in asking why he has been deprived of justice, even in the event of any wrongdoing, he should have been granted access to justice.