

ROHRBACHER CHAIRS HEARING ON BALOCHISTAN, PRONOUNCES IT “BALOOKISTAN”



Ethnic regions in and around Pakistan.
(1980 map from Wikimedia Commons)

Demonstrating the tact, cultural sensitivity and deep research skills of today’s Congressional Republicans, Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) chaired a hearing Wednesday for the House Committee on Foreign Affairs’ Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation and throughout the hearing he mispronounced the name of area being discussed. Proper pronunciation would be described as “Baloochistan” and yet Rohrabacher repeatedly said “Balookistan”.

The topic of the hearing was listed as “Baluchistan” on the committee’s website. The Pakistani press uniformly uses “Balochistan” for its spelling of the province where ethnic Balochs reside. As with many languages and dialects from the region, transliteration of vowels varies, so the “Baluchistan” vs. “Balochistan” spelling matters little. In this

case the proper pronunciation puts that vowel sound as more like the English “oo”, so using the “u” spelling makes a bit of sense. What Rohrabacher mangled is that the “ch” is never pronounced as a “k” sound.

Needless to say, Rohrabacher’s pronunciation became a part of Pakistan’s coverage of the hearing:

The House Committee on Foreign Affairs has declared Balochistan a troubled area and said that the Baloch have seen little benefit from the development of natural gas and other natural resources that are produced in their province.

The US House Committee conducted a hearing on Balochistan on Wednesday under the chair of Congressman Donna Rohrbacher.

Rohrbacher, who kept pronouncing Balochistan as “Balookistan”, said that Islamabad has refused to concede any legitimacy to Baloch nationalism, or to engage the Baloch leadership in serious negotiations. “Its response has been based on brute force, including extra-judicial killings.”

[Emphasis added.]

I’m guessing that the editors at The News were having a bit of fun at Rohrabacher’s expense with their variant spelling of both his first and last names.

Although the hearing was dressed up as a “serious” discussion of the rights of Balochs who seek independence, it seems much more likely that Rohrabacher’s true intent was to disrupt the planned Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline. From Dawn’s coverage of the hearing:

Dr. M. Hosseinbor, a Baloch nationalist scholar, assured the Americans that the Balochs were natural US allies and would like to share the Gwadar port with the

United States, would not allow the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline through their lands and will fight the Taliban as well.

Here is the “full biography” of Dr. Bor from the website of the New York City law firm where he is employed:

M. Hossein Bor’s practice focuses on commercial law, international law, international relations, energy and petroleum, international trade, international transactions, corporate law, contracts and administrative law. Dr. Bor served as Energy and Economic Advisor to the Embassy of the State of Qatar in Washington, D.C. from 1982 to 1998.

Dr. Bor is active in facilitating trade, joint ventures, investment, and project development between American corporations and their counterparts from the Gulf countries. He advises U.S. companies conducting business in the Gulf and overseas corporations about business operations in the U.S., including analysis of U.S. and foreign policy and regulatory issues. Dr. Bor maintains a wide range of contacts among government officials, lawyers and business leaders in the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and Iran.

Dr. Bor previously served as an Adjunct Professor of Law at the Catholic University of America. He has written extensively on various issues relating to the Middle East, including a treatise on Iran and its nationalities.

Considering that Dr. Bor has a degree from Tehran University and that he wrote “a treatise on Iran and its nationalities” it appears that

he is a Baloch from the Iranian side of the border. It's not at all clear how an attorney practicing international commercial law for various oil companies is in a position to make broad claims about the intended foreign policy of a tribal group among whom he appears not to have lived for many years.

The same Dawn article cited above notes that there also was a bit of score-settling behind Rohrabacher's hearing:

There was some score-settling as well, particularly from US lawmakers upset with Pakistan over Osama bin Laden's discovery in Abbottabad and with Islamabad's decision to close Nato's supply lines to Afghanistan.

"They sheltered the man who master-minded the slaughter of 3,000 Americans. Those who still believe Pakistan is a friend, they need to wake up," said Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, a Republican, who organised and chaired the hearing.

The reality, though, is that the situation in Balochistan is highly complex. For a primer on what is happening there now, I recommend this site where Dawn has collected a number of very helpful articles.

Despite Rohrabacher's own protest that his hearing was not "a stunt", it provoked a strong response from Pakistan's Ambassador to the US:

According to the spokesman, Rehman said that the government of Pakistan strongly rejects the purpose and findings of the hearing and considers it an "ill-advised and ill-considered" move that will have serious repercussions for Pakistan-US relations.

"Balochistan is an integral part of the Pakistan," the ambassador said.

"Pakistan is a democracy conducting

itself in accordance with the international law.”

Sherry said that the elected parliament, the Balochistan assembly, the independent judiciary, a vigorous media and a thriving civil society are avenues for expression and seeking redress of political and economic grievances.

“The government is strongly committed to protecting the fundamental rights and freedom in all parts of Pakistan, including Balochistan, and has initiated an extensive programme of constitutional and other reforms to empower all citizens in the continuing consolidation of democracy,” she said.

It is only fair to point out that the hearing did finally point out that Pakistan’s government is not the only party at fault for the ongoing violence in Balochistan. From the Dawn article:

But such comments on Baloch politics were not what shamed the Pakistanis, and others, in the room. It was rampant human rights violations by both sides that shamed them.

In the end, though, I suspect that Rohrabacher’s not-a-stunt will be remembered for the harm it has done to already fragile relations between the US and Pakistan. And that damage stands out strongest in the published statement associated with the testimony of Ralph Peters, who is listed on the committee website as a “Military Analyst and Author”. Peters has quite a checkered past on both the Bowe Bergahl situation and when he suggested war journalists should be killed. His statement Wednesday (pdf) is no less incendiary. All we need to see is the final paragraph:

We need to re-learn the strategic art of acting in our own interests. Generally, our interests are not served by clinging

to old, dictatorial or corrupt regimes, but by declining to support the dying order. At times, military intervention in support of change may be to our advantage. More often, it will be a matter of getting out of the way of the inevitable. But what we should never do is to align ourselves with violent oppressors of minorities, with blackmailers, or with those who help our enemies kill our troops. In other words, it's time to abandon Pakistan and switch our support wholeheartedly to India.

Oh, yeah, that's going to go over well while the US is trying to re-open its supply routes through Pakistan and secure Pakistan's cooperation in negotiations to end the war in Afghanistan. It was most likely this garbage being spewed by Peters that forced the State Department to distance itself from Rohrabacher's not-a-stunt:

When asked about the Congressional hearing on Balochistan, State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland said that their view on Balochistan remains unchanged. "Congress holds hearings on many foreign affairs topics. These hearings don't necessarily imply that the US Government endorses one view or another view. I'd underscore that the State Department is not participating or involved in this hearing today."

The spokesperson referred to comments she had made recently on Balochistan on Twitter, "We emphasise that the United States engages with Pakistan on a whole range of issues, including ways to foster economic development and expand opportunity in Balochistan."

When asked whether the US supports a demand for an independent Balochistan, Nuland said, "Our view on this has not changed, and you know where we've been

on Balochistan. We encourage all the parties in Balochistan to work out their differences peacefully and through a valid political process.”