Press Information
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EDELSTAM FOUNDATION
THE EDELSTAM PRIZE

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – THE EDELSTAM PRIZE 2026 LAUREATE: DR. MAHRANG BALOCH

The Edelstam Foundation has awarded the Edelstam Prize 2026 to Dr. Mahrang Baloch, a physician from the southwestern province of Balochistan in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, for her exceptional courage in defending human rights through peaceful protest. She is currently imprisoned in Pakistan, serving two terms of life imprisonment. Her case has become emblematic of the escalating repression faced by human rights defenders in Pakistan's largest and most marginalised province.

On 22 March 2025, Dr. Mahrang Baloch was arrested during a peaceful sit-in in Quetta, the provincial capital. She had been protesting the enforced disappearance of her Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC) colleague, Bebarg Zehri, a person with a disability who had reportedly been taken by state agencies the previous night. His whereabouts had not been disclosed. The arrest followed a pattern that had begun weeks earlier: after a militant attack on the Jaffar Express passenger train on 11 March 2025, Pakistani authorities launched a sweeping crackdown on the BYC, arresting and forcibly disappearing several of its prominent members. On 21 March, Balochistan police reportedly opened fire on peaceful protesters demanding Zehri's release, killing three people and injuring at least seven. When Mahrang and her colleague Beebow Baloch continued the protest through a sit-in, police raided the demonstration before dawn, using batons and tear gas to disperse the crowd. Both women were detained. For nearly twelve hours, Mahrang's whereabouts were unknown, and she was denied access to family and legal counsel, a pattern that would recur throughout her detention.

On 22 June 2026, an Anti-Terrorism Court in Quetta sentenced Dr. Mahrang Baloch and fellow BYC leader Sibghatullah Shah Jee (also written as Shah Jee Sibghat Ullah) to two terms of life imprisonment. The convictions related to the killing of a Frontier Corps soldier, Sepoy Shabbir Baloch, during the Baloch Raaji Muchi gathering in Gwadar in July 2024. The court found them guilty under Section 302 (murder) of the Pakistan Penal Code and Section 7 of the Anti-Terrorism Act of 1997. The proceedings were conducted inside prison premises, with the defendants permitted to appear only via video link. They boycotted the trial, citing concerns about the judge's impartiality and the denial of their right to a fair hearing, and a state-appointed lawyer represented them in the later stages without consulting them. Amnesty International described the proceedings as an expedited secret trial and stated that no direct evidence was presented linking Mahrang and Shah Jee to the alleged violence. It noted that her participation in the gathering and statements made during the protest, including referring to state officials as "occupiers", were used as grounds for conviction without demonstrating that speech met the threshold for murder or terrorism offences. The organisation described the convictions as a serious violation of the right to a fair trial and called for the immediate release of both defendants. A division bench of the Balochistan High Court has since admitted her appeal against the life sentence for regular hearing and issued notices to the respondents, agreeing to hear the case on its merits.

Background

Dr. Mahrang Baloch was born in Balochistan in 1993. Balochistan, Pakistan's largest province by area, lies in the southwest of the country, bordering Iran and Afghanistan. Despite its

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considerable natural resources, including natural gas and minerals, the province has long experienced poverty, political marginalisation and a lack of investment in public services. For decades, the Baloch people have raised concerns about discrimination, political exclusion, the exploitation of their natural resources and human rights violations by Pakistani security forces.

Enforced disappearances have long been at the centre of these concerns. According to the Human Rights Council of Balochistan, enforced disappearances surged to 1,482 cases in 2025 alone, a 79% increase on the previous year, with 108 minors among the victims. The Frontier Corps was identified as the primary perpetrator in 897 of those cases. Families are routinely left without information about where their relatives are held, whether they are alive, or what charges, if any, have been brought against them. Human rights organisations have documented allegations of arbitrary detention, torture, extrajudicial killings and intimidation of those seeking answers. The Pakistani authorities maintain that security operations are necessary to combat armed insurgent groups operating in the province.

Mahrang grew up in a politically engaged family. Her father, Ghaffar Langove, was a political activist who spoke out about the rights of the Baloch people. He introduced his daughter at an early age to political and social issues and encouraged her to pursue education and stand up for her community.

In December 2009, when Mahrang was only 16 years old, her father forcibly disappeared in Karachi. He was reportedly taken by security personnel while travelling to a hospital. His disappearance became a turning point in her life. As a teenager, she joined other families of disappeared Baloch people, many of whom had spent years searching for their loved ones without any answers from the authorities. On one occasion, she burned her schoolbooks outside the Quetta Press Club to draw attention to her father's case. He was eventually released, but in July 2011 he was abducted again, and his body was later found bearing signs of torture. In interviews, Mahrang has described her father as her political teacher and has spoken about how his disappearance and death shaped her decision to dedicate herself to human rights.

After her father's death, Mahrang moved to Karachi with her mother and siblings, before returning to Balochistan to study medicine at Bolan Medical College in Quetta. In December 2017, her brother, Nasir Baloch, was reportedly abducted by Pakistani security forces. Mahrang campaigned for his release and, having traditionally worn a veil, decided to remove it and take a more public role in the protests. After approximately three months, her brother was released. Despite these experiences, she completed her studies and qualified as a doctor with an MBBS degree from Bolan Medical College. Increasingly, however, her personal experiences drew her towards human rights advocacy, and she emerged as a prominent voice among those demanding an end to enforced disappearances.

On 26 May 2020, an incident in Turbat became a turning point for Mahrang and the wider Baloch human rights movement. Members of a death squad reportedly entered a family home, killed a woman named Maliknaz and seriously injured her young daughter, Bramsh. Mahrang spoke out against the killing and the wider abuses in the region. The Bramsh Yakjehti Committee was established to demand justice for Maliknaz and give a voice to her daughter; it was later renamed the Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC). The BYC grew into a broad civil rights movement, bringing together activists, families of disappeared persons and human rights defenders to document violations, support affected families, and demand justice and accountability. Mahrang became one of its leading figures.

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That same year, Mahrang led protests against the introduction of online education in Balochistan during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the region's poor electricity supply and limited internet access, she and other activists argued that the policy effectively denied many students their right to education. During the demonstrations, she and several fellow activists were arrested and detained.

On 10 October 2021, two young children, a brother and sister, were killed when mortar shells, reportedly fired by Pakistani forces, struck civilians in Hoshab, near Turbat. Mahrang attended their funerals, where women carried the children's biers on their shoulders in an unprecedented public act of protest. Photographs of the women spread widely on social media, drawing attention to the violence in Balochistan.

In December 2021, allegations emerged that female students at the University of Balochistan had been secretly recorded, blackmailed and sexually abused by individuals associated with the university administration. Mahrang and her colleagues mobilised protests demanding accountability, helping to bring the allegations into the public spotlight and encouraging more women in Balochistan to speak out against abuse and discrimination.

In November 2023, Mahrang became one of the leading figures of the Baloch Long March. The march began in Turbat after the alleged extrajudicial killing of 24-year-old Balach Mola Bakhsh by Pakistan's Counter Terrorism Department on 23 November; Balach and three others were reportedly killed in staged encounters while in custody. Instead of quietly burying him, his family organised protests in Turbat, joined by women activists including Sammi Deen Baloch and Sabiha Baloch. Sammi Deen Baloch led a convoy of families of the disappeared from Turbat to Quetta, where Mahrang took over the leadership of the movement as it continued towards Islamabad. The approximately 1,600-kilometre journey brought together families who had spent years searching for missing husbands, sons, brothers and fathers.

Despite attempts by the authorities to stop the convoy, it reached Islamabad, where security forces responded with baton charges, tear gas and water cannon. Mahrang and several other participants were arrested, threatened and ordered to return to Balochistan. She refused to abandon the protest, and following widespread media attention and international pressure, the detainees were released. She then established a protest camp outside the National Press Club in Islamabad, using the media to bring international attention to enforced disappearances in Balochistan. The march gave national and international visibility to grievances that had long been ignored, and Mahrang emerged as an influential spokesperson for a new generation of Baloch activists challenging state policies through peaceful mobilisation.

In June 2024, Mahrang announced the Baloch Raaji Muchi (Baloch National Gathering), to be held in the coastal city of Gwadar on 28 July. Its purpose was to bring together people from across Balochistan to protest against enforced disappearances, killings and the exploitation of the province's natural resources without the consent of its population, as well as development projects and foreign investment that, according to the organisers, had not benefited local people. The authorities attempted to prevent the gathering through restrictions on movement, roadblocks and a heavy security presence, and there were reports of violence against peaceful protest caravans. Four Baloch men were reported killed in connection with the events: Naseer Langove in Mastung on 27 July, Asghar Marwani in Gwadar on 28 July, Hamdan Badini in Noshki on 2 August, and Hikmatullah Baloch, who was seriously injured in Noshki on 2 August and died of his injuries on 13 September 2024.

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Despite the violence, large numbers of people reached Gwadar. The authorities closed the city's entry and exit routes and suspended internet services. After failing to prevent the gathering, they negotiated written agreements with the organisers. However, the BYC reported that the agreements were not implemented and that participants and activists instead faced retaliation. It was this gathering that later formed the basis of the murder and terrorism convictions against Mahrang.

Detention, Health and Trial

The arrest on 22 March 2025 marked the beginning of a prolonged detention. Mahrang and several other activists were initially held under Section 3 of the Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance, a law allowing preventive detention without criminal trial. Her family and supporters were at first unable to establish her whereabouts; she was later located in Hudda District Prison in Quetta. The authorities repeatedly extended her detention. The MPO detention orders against her and five fellow activists expired on 22 June 2025, which should have led to their release. Instead, on 8 July 2025, hours before a judicial review board was due to examine the legality of their detention, they were brought before an anti-terrorism court and handed over to police custody. Criminal cases relating to terrorism, murder and sedition were then brought against her and other BYC leaders under the Anti-Terrorism Act and the Pakistan Penal Code. In June 2025, the Balochistan Assembly also passed the Anti-Terrorism (Balochistan Amendment) Act 2025, which allows detention without charge for up to three months. More than two dozen anti-terrorism cases were filed against her across Pakistan, so many that her lawyers struggled to keep track, let alone provide meaningful representation. Mahrang is not the only BYC leader in prison. Her colleagues Beebow Baloch, Bebarg Zehri, Sibghatullah Shah Jee and Gulzadi Baloch have also been detained, repeatedly denied bail and tried inside prison without access for the media or independent observers. Bebarg Zehri, a person with a disability, remains in detention, and his family has raised serious concerns about his health. Some of the cases against Mahrang have collapsed: an anti-terrorism court in Karachi acquitted her in a sedition and terrorism case, and in October 2026 the Sindh High Court dismissed the state's appeal against that acquittal.

Concerns about her health emerged early and have persisted. According to Amnesty International, Mahrang developed a severe spinal disease in detention and, despite repeated requests to prison authorities, received no adequate medical care for six months, forcing her to self-medicate. According to the BYC, her written requests to the jail superintendent went unanswered; only after her lawyers approached the court was she examined by a jail doctor, who recommended diagnostic tests, yet she was still not taken to hospital. On 18 February 2026, as her condition deteriorated further, she was finally transferred to Sheikh Zayed Hospital, without her family or lawyers being notified. Medical examinations confirmed the condition, which, without the necessary treatment, risks permanently impairing her mobility. The BYC also disclosed that an MRI scan showed disc bulges at L4-L5 and L5-S1 with nerve root impingement and a central annular tear at L4-L5, and police withheld the report from her and her lawyers for ten days. In an article she wrote for The Guardian, published on 1 April 2026, Mahrang described her treatment in detention, including a year spent in solitary confinement.

In May 2026, the UN Committee against Torture, concluding its review of Pakistan, expressed concern about her situation alongside other detained political figures and activists. In July 2026, United Nations human rights experts strongly condemned her sentence as a "grave injustice" and a "travesty of justice". They expressed alarm that anti-terrorism and murder charges were being used to suppress peaceful protest and the freedoms of expression and

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association, noting that the court had inferred intent to kill primarily from her participation in the demonstration under an overly broad application of the Anti-Terrorism Act. They highlighted the number of proceedings against her, with at least 50 police complaints reportedly pending, and warned that this pattern appeared intended to intimidate, punish and deter her and other Baloch activists. They also raised concerns about her conditions of detention, her limited access to medical care and allegations of pressure on members of her family.

Her case was reportedly first accepted for review by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in April 2025, following an application by her international legal adviser. On 5 August 2026, the Human Rights Foundation (HRF), together with Freedom House and Hindus for Human Rights, filed a further petition with the Working Group, asking it to declare her detention arbitrary and to call for her immediate and unconditional release. HRF described her life sentence as "a clear effort to silence the dissent of the Baloch people by targeting one of their most effective and prominent leaders".

Several further criminal cases against Mahrang and other BYC members remain pending. The use of multiple legal proceedings to keep human rights defenders in detention has raised serious concerns about continued judicial harassment. As the UN experts warned, convictions like hers risk silencing independent voices in Balochistan and further shrinking civic space, particularly for women human rights defenders who have challenged entrenched norms through peaceful advocacy.

The Edelstam Foundation calls on the Government of Pakistan to release Dr. Mahrang Baloch and the other detained BYC members immediately and unconditionally, to quash her convictions and withdraw all cases linked to her peaceful activism, and, pending her release, to ensure she receives adequate medical care and regular access to her family and lawyers of her choice. The Foundation further urges the Government of Sweden, the European Union and the international community to raise her case publicly and in their dialogue with Pakistan, and to follow her appeal before the Balochistan High Court closely.

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