

## Whither Balochistan?

Friday 15 September 2006, by [BENGALI Kaiser](#) (Date first published: 14 September 2006).

THE murder of Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti at the hands of state security forces is both a human and a national tragedy, with consequences of unimaginably perilous scale. That such disproportionate force was used to kill a 79-year old ailing man and that his bereaved family has been denied the opportunity to offer their last respects and accord him a proper burial is deplorable.

There may be many questions about Akbar Bugti's conduct as a tribal leader. Today, however, he stands tall as a man who forsook the comforts of his home in Dera Bugti and took up abode in mountain caves to fight for the rights of his people. The same cannot be said of many of his detractors living in the comforts of official residences and in cantonments and defence housing schemes in Islamabad, Lahore or Karachi.

The calamity and the sordid handling of the aftermath reflects General Musharraf's arrogant faith in military solutions to the patently political problems that the country faces, including those that have been created by the perpetuation of the current military dictatorship since October 1999. The generals have certainly not learnt any lessons from Pakistan's unfortunate history of a quarter of a century ago, nor from the current failure of the world's sole superpower to enforce its writ in Iraq, or of the mighty Israeli army's failure to write its agenda in Lebanon.

In 1971, the then generals opted to lay down their arms before the Indian army rather than negotiate and arrive at a compromise with the leaders of the people of the eastern wing of Pakistan. This attitude appears to be pervasive even today. And general Musharraf's chest-thumping speech in Murree, hurling threats at the people of Balochistan, as well as of Pakistan, is likely to stoke more defiance rather than scare anyone.

The policy drift that the country has suffered under General Musharraf's leadership portends disaster for the country. Questions about the general's judgment had arisen immediately after the inane militarily untenable Kargil misadventure. He also made a foreign policy U-turn, hours after the tragedy of 9/11, and Pakistan shifted from being the most pro-Taliban country in the world to the most ardent 'terrorist' busting country in the US camp. The slogan that was then trumpeted as a rationale for the U-turn was that Pakistan must come first.

The implications of the principle of this simplistic justification are disturbing. Extended further, it could imply that, under external pressure, the Kashmir cause or the nuclear status could be abandoned on the grounds that 'Pakistan has to come first'. After all, it could be perceivably argued that there can be no struggle for the freedom of the Kashmiri people if there was no Pakistan or of what use will the nuclear arsenal be if there was no Pakistan?

Now General Musharraf has proclaimed that the writ of the government will be enforced 'at all costs'. One hopes that 'all costs' does not imply that the writ of his government - of questionable legitimacy - will be imposed even at the cost of Pakistan. These questions are not frivolous, given the increasingly apparent absence of any degree of political intellect in general Musharraf's policy decisions. After all, the legacy of disastrous policy decisions by the coterie of Generals headed by Yahya Khan did not provide any assurance of intelligent conduct. And, given the current military regime's paramount and almost exclusive objective of clinging on to power, there can be no confidence in the quality of decision-making on national, regional or international issues.

General Musharraf has tried to present the conflict in Balochistan as one where a mere three sardars, out of about 75, are attempting to sabotage development. The argument holds no water. Several facts need to be taken into account. Balochistan is a very heterogeneous province. The sardari system is a Baloch institution. Out of 26 districts, one-third of them in the north/north-east are populated by

Pukhtuns and, as such, not subject to the sardari system. The system also does not prevail in the Mekran coast and adjoining districts.

It appears, therefore, that the sardari system is prevalent only in about one-third of the districts in the eastern/central part of the province. This is the part over which up to about 75 sardars are said to hold sway. As such, the area controlled by the three 'anti-development' sardars is likely to be rather small. The question that arises, is: why has development not blossomed in the rest of the province?

An overview of the development scene in Balochistan is discomfiting and the extent of relative deprivation in the province is appalling. Eighteen out of the 20 most infrastructure-deprived districts in Pakistan are in Balochistan. The percentage of districts that are classified as high deprivation stands as follows: 29 per cent in Punjab, 50 per cent in Sindh, 62 per cent in the NWFP, and 92 per cent in Balochistan. If Quetta and Ziarat are excluded, all of Balochistan falls into the high deprivation category. And Quetta's ranking would fall if the cantonment is excluded from the analysis. The percentage of population living in a high degree of deprivation stands at 25 per cent in Punjab, 23 per cent in urban Sindh, 49 per cent in rural Sindh, 51 per cent in the NWFP, and 88 per cent in Balochistan.

Measured in terms of poverty, the percentage of population living below the poverty line stands at 26 per cent in Punjab, 38 per cent in rural Sindh, 27 per cent in urban Sindh, 29 per cent in the NWFP, and 48 per cent in Balochistan. Yet another stark measure of Balochistan's relative deprivation is that while the country boasts of a 50-per cent-plus literacy rate, the same for rural women in Balochistan is a mere seven per cent.

Balochistan's relative decline is also indicated by provincially disaggregated national accounts data. Estimates for the period 1973-2000 show that Punjab alone has increased its share of national GDP by two percentage points from 52.7 per cent to 54.7 per cent. Sindh - on account of Karachi - and the NWFP have maintained their share. Balochistan's share has declined by nearly

one percentage point from 4.5 per cent to 3.7 per cent. Resultantly, the annual rate of growth of per capita GDP has been 2.4 per cent in Punjab and 0.2 per cent in Balochistan.

Statistics tell only a part of the story. In fact, given the conditions in Balochistan, Pakistan's national statistics do not tell the full story. This is because no enumerator of the official statistics collecting department makes the effort to visit a settlement that is two days walking distance away. Conditions in such settlements are so dire that, if half the children born in a family survive, it is considered lucky. The absence of such data has tended to show national statistics in a better light than it actually is - and has tended to conceal Balochistan's real plight.

Apart from chronic underdevelopment, the insurgency is also a product of the exclusion of the Baloch from the mainstream national political process. After all, in the period since independence to date, how many of the corps commanders or lieutenant-generals or brigadiers have been Baloch? How many of the ambassadors or high commissioners in Pakistan missions abroad have been Baloch? How many of the federal secretaries or additional secretaries have been Baloch? How many of the heads of public organisations - a la Wapda - have been Baloch? How many of the heads of the Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry have been Baloch? How many of the members of Pakistan's national cricket or hockey teams have been Baloch? And so on. Perhaps General Musharraf or his prime minister or his more garrulous ministers would venture to answer some of the above questions, at least with respect to the current situation.

Admittedly, Balochistan's underdevelopment is a product of over half a century of exploitation and neglect. Unfortunately, however, General Musharraf's seven years in power has merely seen an extension of the past record. The fact is that, not unlike any previous governments, the Musharraf regime has never had any development agenda for Balochistan. The few mega projects that have been undertaken, a la Gwadar, are actually motivated by strategic considerations.

They are more likely to bypass the local population and, worse still, turn the Baloch into a minority in their home province.

The Baloch intelligentsia has seen through Islamabad's colonisation game and the general insurgency is merely a response. The military's operation in Balochistan is a counter response, not to the insurgency per se, but to the challenge posed to Islamabad's colonisation agenda.

Resultantly, the situation is extremely precarious. With the army possibly embroiled in Balochistan, the defence of the eastern frontier is likely to be compromised. There are likely to be serious impacts on the national economy as well. Without security across the vast province, Gwadar port's planned position as the third port of the country and a transshipment point for central Asia and western China will go up in smoke. So will the under-discussion Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project. The rest of the country too will not remain unaffected. Unlike in the case of East Pakistan, Balochistan is not a thousand kilometers away.

Given Karachi's geographical proximity to Balochistan, the presence of large Baloch settlements in the city, and the sympathetic Sindhi nationalist element, any civil war-like situation in Balochistan will inevitably envelope Karachi in the theatre of conflict. And, given that Karachi and neighbouring Port Qasim are the only seaports of the country and handle the entire shipping of export and import cargo, the situation will impact the economy in all parts of the country.

The postponement of the National Assembly session, scheduled for March 3, 1971, in Dhaka, finally snapped the tenuous emotional thread that had bound the eastern province with the rest of the country. Today, the killing of Akbar Bugti has severely frayed the emotional thread linking Balochistan with Pakistan.

The withdrawal of Baloch nationalist legislators from the parliamentary process is an ominous signal that cannot and should not be ignored. If the damage to the federation is to be repaired, the military establishment will need to withdraw

from the political, economic and commercial arenas and a genuinely elected government will need to take effective charge of the country to assuage the deep wounds that have been inflicted on Balochistan.

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