



IDSS COMMENTARIES (92/2006)

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Death of a Tribal Leader: Implications of the Baluchistan Riots

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1 September 2006

ON August 26, Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, the Oxford-educated tribal leader of Pakistan's restive Baluchistan province, was killed in an operation carried out by the country's military. Although the military subsequently denied this, President General Pervez Musharraf is said to have considered his death a "personal victory".

Pakistani Baluchistan

Nawab Akbar Khan was a highly-educated man in a land where illiteracy is still rampant. For several decades, he had been highly influential in Baluch politics. His death in an aerial bombardment on his cave in Kohlu, about 240 km east of the provincial capital of Quetta, has led to widespread unrest in the area. Bugti's death was followed by rioting by hundreds of students from Baluchistan university, a government institution, and the declaration of martial law in the province. Apparently, Bugti's opposition to the government of President Musharraf, and prior to that to that of Mrs Benazir Bhutto, earned him some deadly enemies. Subsequently also, mysterious bombings of private enterprises, such as shops, have occurred. So far, the motives behind those bombings and the identities of the perpetrators have not been disclosed.

Pakistani Baluchistan, the scene of recurring tribal unrest, received wider attention back in 1998 when Islamabad conducted underground nuclear tests in the Chagai Hills. Pakistani Baluchistan is also rich in natural gas reserves. In one of his last interviews, which was aired to an international audience several days ago by the Singapore-based pan-Asian TV programme ChannelNewsAsia, Bugti referred to those reserves as "the national wealth of Baluchistan".

Pakistani Baluchistan, home to about 7 million people, is by no means ethnically homogeneous. The Baluchis dominate the south of the country, while the Pashtuns are the majority in and around Quetta and the north. There are also other ethnic minorities in the province, such as Tajiks, aside from a large number of refugees from Afghanistan. There is also an Iranian dimension.



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Iranian Baluchistan

“Sistān and Balūchestān”, one of the thirty [provinces](#) of [Iran](#), is situated in the southeast of the country, bordering [Pakistan](#) and [Afghanistan](#). The provincial capital is [Zāhedān](#), with a population of about 420,000. Desolate and underdeveloped, “Sistān and Balūchestān” is one of the poorest of [Iran](#)’s provinces.

The third largest in [Iran](#), with an area of 181,600 square km and a population of about 2.1 million, the province is also of fundamental strategic significance for Teheran. It borders the Indian Ocean through the Arabian Sea, not far away from the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow, strategically-important waterway between the [Gulf of Oman](#) in the southeast and the [Persian Gulf](#) in the southwest. Chāhbahār, the province’s main port -- now known as Bandar-e Beheshtī – is Iran’s closest and best access point to the [Indian Ocean](#). It is also the focal point for development of the east of the country through expansion of transit routes among countries situated in the northern part of the [Indian Ocean](#) and [Central Asia](#). At the same time, it is home to a naval base and a free trade and industrial zone.

Iranian worries

The recurring riots in a country as ethnically diverse as Pakistan would perhaps not warrant

Iranian concern if Pakistani Baluchistan did not have a common border. The situation in Pakistani Baluchistan has caught the attention of Iran because the Baluchis are also calling Iran their home. Although Iran is a Shia-dominated country, the Iranian Baluchis, like their brethren across the border, are Sunni Muslims.

However, in the past, the unrest in neighbouring Pakistani Baluchistan has been portrayed in predominantly Western media as a “nationalist struggle”. The Baluchis are said to contest their respective “Islamic regimes” in either Islamabad or Teheran, regardless of the particular denomination of the particular ruler.

In a recent contribution to the *Jamestown Foundation Terrorism Monitor*, Chris Zambelis directed attention to terrorist activities in Iranian Baluchistan. As he has pointed out, an obscure and so far unknown Sunni Baluchi militant group known as *Jundallāh*, “Soldiers of God” has carried out “Iraq-style” beheadings of Iranian (ethnic Persian) officials and even Red Crescent personnel.

It is significant that similar incidences have occurred recently in other Iranian provinces that are dominated by Sunnite minorities, such as Turkmens and Kurds. In 2005, in Iran’s ethnic Kurdish regions alone, about 120 Iranian soldiers are said to have been killed. Khuzestan, a province with a large ethnic Arab but Shi’a population, has also seen several bomb explosions which have been blamed on terrorists operating from neighbouring occupied Iraq. Last but not least, Iran’s staunchly Shi’a ethnic Turkic Azerbaijan, too, has seen some unrest earlier this year.

Conclusion

Incidences like these are reminiscent of the Iraq-Iran war of 1980-88 which was launched by Saddam’s Iraq under the pretext of “liberating” Iran’s ethnic Arabs. It is conventional wisdom that ethnic Persians make up scarcely more than half of Iran’s population of about 80 million. However, one should consider that the ethnic minorities themselves are “Persianate”, that is, they have been heavily influenced by Persian culture in the course of Islamic history.

In the context of the current disagreement between Teheran and the West over what is usually referred to as the “Iranian nuclear crisis”, the Baluchistan issue has the potential to develop into a new problem for Teheran, this time on its weak southeastern flank. The strategic significance of the region is thus beyond any doubt.

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