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Baluchistan: A Miscalculated Killing

*Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman**

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THE recent killing of Baluch nationalist leader, Nawab Akbar Bugti, a prominent politician who served many times in top Pakistani government positions, at the hands of Pakistani security agencies has sent shock waves across the country.

Since its inception in 1947, Pakistan had faced a separatist problem in Baluchistan, one of its four provinces. The people of Baluchistan found their aspirations and traditional nomadic life frustrated by the extension of central administration over their lands when parts of the region were included within the borders of Pakistan. Various separatist groups sprung up to challenge the Pakistani government. Some of these Baluch nationalists group were Marxist and sought Soviet support for an autonomous Baluchistan. In 1973, a full-fledged violent insurgency led by the Baluchistan People Liberation Front (BPLF) broke out lasting more than four years.

How it started

Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, support for the Baluchs ceased as they distanced themselves from the Soviets in support of the Afghan people. Small skirmishes continued to occur between the Pakistani security authorities and the Baluch nationalists for most of the 1980s and 1990s. This period also marked the involvement of most nationalists, including Nawab Akbar Bugti, within the political system. Bugti became chief minister of the province during this period. Many of these nationalists grew disillusioned with the system when their demand for a better deal for themselves in the energy-rich province fell on deaf ears. By 2004 Baluchistan was again up in arms against the federal government, with the BPLF and the Baluchistan Liberation Army (BLA) conducting various operations.

The main contention between Islamabad and the Baluch is over the division of returns from massive gas and mineral deposits found in the province. Ordinary Baluch feel that they do not benefit from the exploits of these resources. Last year, the ruling Pakistan Muslim League agreed on a package of incentives for the Baluch that included a constitutional amendment giving greater autonomy to the province, but it was overruled by Musharraf. The growing frustrations of the Baluch were manifested in increased guerilla-style attacks on government infrastructures. Violence reached a crescendo in March 2005 when the Pakistani government, attempting to target Bugti who had started an insurrection, shelled the town of Dera Bugti. The fighting that erupted between tribal militias and government soldiers resulted in the deaths of 67 people. In the most recent operation, Bugti was killed in a large-scale battle in his cave hideout along with some male members of his family.

Domestic Implications

This latest saga is likely to further intensify the deepening political crisis in Pakistan in light of what is deemed as a failure of the government to react decisively in the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Pakistani Islamists' campaign for the maintenance of *hudud* laws in Pakistan. Protests over Bugti's death have spread across the port city of Karachi, Quetta and many parts of the country. Capitalizing on this latest incident, the Muttahida Majlisi Amal (MMA), an alliance of six religious parties turned a mass rally they organised in support of *hudud* laws in Pakistan into a rally condemning the killing of Bugti and denouncing President Musharraf's regime. In doing so, they successfully drew the support of various secular parties such as the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) who were initially apprehensive of the MMA's pro-*hudud* stance. The anti-Musharraf feeling finds resonance among Pakistani masses, judging by the large turnout in various rallies against Musharraf.

Riding on the perceived unhappiness of the masses and the unity of the opposition, opposition parties including the MMA and PPP moved a no-confidence vote against the government of Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, an ally of Musharraf. While the motion did not succeed, it sent a clear message that Musharraf's position is increasingly fragile. At another level, Bugti's killing is likely to strengthen groups such as the BLA. Musharraf has earned the permanent enmity of not just the Baluch rebels but the wider Baluch populace in the province. The killing of Bugti will not only radicalize Baluch who did not believe in an armed struggle against Pakistan but result in the shift of their demands from provincial autonomy to complete independence of the province.

War on Terror Disrupted

Bugti's killing is also likely to impact the American war on terror. Baluchistan has become a strategic backyard for the Taliban. The recent arrests of several Al-Qaeda and Taliban fugitives points to this. For instance, on 15 August 2006, 27 Taliban fighters were arrested at a private hospital in Quetta, the capital of the province. It seems that the Taliban has adopted a new strategy of using Baluchistan rather than the North and South Waziristan areas in North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) as a base to launch attacks against Afghan and American forces in Afghanistan. As it stands, support for the Taliban and Al-Qaeda is strong amongst the local populace. Perception that Musharraf is acting at the behest of the Americans to stabilize Baluchistan from separatist elements may result in the coalescing of Baluch nationalists and the Taliban against the alleged Pakistan-United States nexus.

The current unstable state of the province will make it extremely difficult for the Americans to pursue its political and military objectives of annihilating remnants of Al-Qaeda operatives in the region and assisting in the transition of Afghanistan into a democratic entity. This is especially true if local elements enhance support for the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

Larger Economic Consequences

With unrest prevailing in Baluchistan, concerns are growing over the future of the Gwadar port in the region. The Gwadar port, developed by the Pakistani, Chinese and American governments in 2002 was built to capitalize on opportunities for trade with landlocked Central Asian States, Afghanistan and Russia. Various oil pipelines and highways linking oil rich countries in Central Asia to the port had been built and more had been planned. The port was supposed to be a trading centre between these countries and China as well as the Southeast Asian countries. A pipeline linking Iranian and Indian gas pipeline was been

planned. The prospect of trade seemed bleak judging from the current state of affairs in Baluchistan. Already, Baluch nationalists had blown up a gas pipeline outside Baluchistan's Kalat city. Judging by this incident and previous incidences, the pipelines could be caught in the crossfire between Baluch nationalists and the government forces if violence continues to increase in Baluchistan. This will certainly have an adverse economic impact on Pakistan and its regional economic partners considering the large amount of money invested in the project.

This latest political development is likely to have severe ramifications on the regime of President Musharraf as well as the security of the region. As such, developments in the next few months will once again test the resilience of the regime and chart the direction for the American war on terror.

* *Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman is a research assistant with the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.*