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Pakistan 2012: Dicing With Its Own Future

By Sajjad Ashraf

Synopsis

Pakistan is rent by regional resentment, ethnic-linguistic divisions and provincial enmities, while stuck in a quagmire of criminality and terrorism. It faces the prospect of another redrawing of its boundaries unless it can resolve the internal conflicts and restore credible and honest leadership.

Commentary

MORE THAN 30 years after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan is still sucked in a quagmire. Its governance, never a strong point, has broken down. Pakistan is now radicalised to a point where even the Afghan President Hamid Karzai accuses it of exporting ‘terrorism’. Pakistan’s economic progress is in serious jeopardy. Its social fabric is torn seemingly beyond repair.

Located on historic invasion routes to India, the lands that now constitute Pakistan have had their fair share of border changes. In the process many kingdoms, sultanates and states have been formed and disintegrated. The Pakistan created on 14 August 1947 broke apart in an acrimonious war in 1971 into Bangladesh and West Pakistan. Now three territorial issues have the potential of seriously altering its current boundaries, against the backdrop of perceived discrimination – which became the basis of independence of Pakistan and then Bangladesh. The country faces what a TV anchorperson called “a 1971 moment”.

Balochistan resentment

Balochistan, Pakistan’s largest province by area, constituting nearly 42 percent of the country, and containing much of its natural resources, is into its fifth military confrontation with the federation since its controversial accession in 1948. Balochis have continued to resent the exploitation of their resources with little compensation.

The current troubles began in 2002, when the army moved in to set up cantonments in Kohlu and Sui Districts. The callous killing of Oxford-educated Baloch leader Nawab Akbar Bugti in 2006 has led the Baloch nationalists and the military into a war of attrition. Thousands of Baloch young men have allegedly disappeared. Many tortured and mutilated bodies have since been found.

In September this year, the self-exiled former Chief Minister of Balochistan Sardar Akhtar Mengal, in a surprise Supreme Court appearance, drawing parallels with Bangladesh’s Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, presented his “six

points” for bringing peace to the province. But unlike Mujib’s, these “six points” only demand establishment of rule of law in Balochistan. He said: “Why should we not divorce peacefully...?” Seemingly ready for a negotiated settlement to secure control of their governance and resources, none of the self-exiled Baloch nationalist leaders have opposed the “six points”.

The provincial chief minister admits he has no authority. The Supreme Court has ruled that the Balochistan government has constitutionally failed. The military’s statement supporting a political solution to the Balochistan problem provided it is “within the constitution” sounds hollow. The rest of the political leadership and public opinion supports the Baloch. A proposed energy pipeline, critical to economic growth of Pakistan and Gwadar port’s success, is contingent upon peace in Balochistan.

Splitting Sindh

Sindh, the only province that voted a Muslim League majority government before partition of India, has not forgiven the Punjab-led army for Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s killing. To destroy the Bhutto charisma, especially in urban Sindh, General Zia ul Haq sponsored the Mohajir Qaumi Movement-MQM (meaning refugees – the descendents of migrants from India) later renamed Muttihida Qaumi Movement, arguably the first ethnic party in Pakistan. Karachi-centered, the MQM, has been unable to garner any support in other provinces while Sindhi nationalists resent MQM’s control of Karachi.

The growing influx of Pashtuns into Karachi since the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and consequent MQM cadre displacement from jobs and businesses makes it akin to Beirut of the 1970s and 80s. Comprising about 25 per cent of 20 million people in Karachi and swelling, the Pashtuns now demand more political space. With MQM unable to augment their numbers, every round of trouble is deadlier than the previous one. The turf battles include target killings, kidnappings for ransom and extortions. Criminal gangs run Karachi. Disruption in Karachi’s economic life adversely impacts the whole country.

President Asif Ali Zardari, to secure a governing coalition, is taking the short-term route of placating the MQM, which is widely believed to harbour plans to divide Sindh. The MQM demands and gets what it wants every time it threatens to walk out of the coalition. The recently-promulgated Sindh Local Government System, negotiated secretly between the PPP and the MQM, virtually dividing Sindh between urban and rural, will solidify MQM’s control of cities and thus its access to huge funds. The Sindhi nationalists and other coalition partners have quit the Sindh cabinet in protest and Sindh is agitating violently.

The MQM and the Pashtuns are arming themselves for a possible showdown. The MQM are in a hurry to secure political advantage. The danger lies in matters going out of control where the MQM takes the last stand with their backs to the sea. Unless a political understanding is reached soon, it may well degenerate into another ethno-nationalist armed conflict.

Punjab division

The PPP, protesting discrimination against southern Punjab, has called for the division of Punjab for ‘administrative’ reasons into a Saraiki-speaking southern Punjab province and northern Punjab. The real reason is PPP’s inability to break PML-N’s (Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif) stranglehold over Punjab. A call for division of Punjab, that considers itself as the glue holding the country together, necessarily provokes sharp reaction.

The PML-N, mindful of the electoral cost of opposing the idea, has demanded that Punjab be divided into three instead of two. Attempting to draw political mileage, it called for the creation of Hazara and FATA provinces out of the present Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK). Hazara, a non-Pashto speaking area, agitates against renaming the province KPK.

Punjab would not let its advantage of numbers and economic weight be undermined through its division. It has pushed for similar break-ups of other provinces so that Punjab’s relative strength is maintained. Being the largest province, politics in Punjab affects the other provinces, threatening a snowball effect of division.

Political sparring has already begun for elections due early next year, leading to hardening of positions, drawing similarities with the fissures between East and West Pakistan prior to the 1970 elections. The big issue is the reaction of the heavily Punjab-based military. If trouble spills over to a point where a military solution is sought at the expense of political accommodation, a Bangladesh-type situation - the so-called “1971 moment” – may arise.

Only a few things, like the cold-blooded attack on teenage girl Malala Yousafzai, hate of America or cricket,

unite Pakistanis. Pakistan needs to shed its own ignorance, elect credible and honest leaders, establish rule of law and look inwards to secure its future.

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