

Nawab Bugti's Assassination: Future Portents

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"I have been a Baloch for several centuries. I have been a Muslim for 1400 years. I have been a Pakistani for just over fifty",

Late Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti¹

As the insurgency in Balochistan drags into a long drawn out stalemate between the military regime and the Baloch nationalists, the killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti has added an ominous dimension to it. Pakistani security forces killed Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, popularly known as the "Tiger of Balochistan" in an encounter in Kohlu district in the early hours of August 26, 2006. This is quite in line with Pakistan's military ruler, Gen Musharraf's desire to establish his writ by force in the province. He may have imagined that the best way to resolve the current crisis was to eliminate the recalcitrant Baloch *sardars*, who, the General thinks, are being supported by foreign powers to threaten the integrity of Pakistan. The ongoing army action in Balochistan also indicates that the military and not the civilian leadership is taking all the decisions regarding Balochistan. The disconnect between the military and civilian perceptions is quite stark when one analyses the killing of Nawab Bugti, particularly in the light of the statement made by Balochistan Governor Owais Ghani, just a few weeks earlier, that the government had no intention of harming Nawab Bugti as he was a respected figure and too old to be punished.²

Although a government-sponsored council reportedly attended by the *waderas* (*nobles*) of all sub-clans of the Bugti tribe had disowned Nawab Bugti, on August 24, 2006, as the leader of the Bugti tribe and announced an end to the *sardari* system,³ the spontaneous popular reaction to his killing indicates that he had neither lost his aura nor his authority. The security establishment in Pakistan had been planning to remove Nawab

Bugti from the political scene for quite some time. They had made an unsuccessful attempt in March 2005 by targeting his residential complex in Dera Bugti with as many as 17 shells.⁴ His hideout came under intense attack again, in July 2006, but he had survived both these attacks.

The tactics adopted by the Pakistani establishment to deal with the Baloch insurgency indicate that the military leadership is confident that it can resolve the issue by brute force.⁵ Many analysts and opposition leaders have, on the contrary, portrayed Bugti's killing as a major threat to the federation and have foreseen a replay of the events that led to the loss of East Pakistan in 1971. In its report dated September 14, 2006, the International Crisis Group (ICG) has appealed to the international community to press Pakistani government to end all military action in Pakistan and to stop practices that violate human rights like torture, arbitrary arrests and extra-judicial killings.⁶

Although General Musharraf had initially "congratulated" the army on its success in eliminating Nawab Bugti, widespread criticism of the killing forced the regime to retract from this position. The original media reports had mentioned that satellite phone trackers were used to find the location of Nawab Bugti before the attack. There is absolutely no doubt about the fact that Nawab Bugti was the target even if a subsequent version issued by the ISPR on the night of August 26 claimed that it was an usual counter-insurgency operation and the area was targeted after an army helicopter came under fierce attack from the rebels while over-flying the region. The resultant battle led to the caving in of the mud bunker where he along with his men had taken shelter. The fact that over 20 elite commandos were killed by the rebels indicated that the rebels gave the security forces a tough fight before they capitulated.⁷ A white paper issued later by the government held Nawab Bugti responsible for the fighting that led to his death.⁸

According to yet another official version given out by the government four days after the killing, Bugti was not targeted by the military and the intention was to apprehend him alive but the cave, in which he was hiding, collapsed owing to a mysterious blast, just as military personnel were entering it. However, these shifting statements have only raised suspicions rather than clearing the air about the manner and circumstances of his killing. To add fuel to the fire, the government took five days to recover the body. This gave further impetus to the theories that he was not killed

in the cave as the government claimed but in an encounter in the open, or in custody after being apprehended. There were rumours that the government wanted to use his dead body as a bargaining chip with his family, and even that chemical weapons had been used in the assault on the cave, which was why the government was reluctant to hand over the body. Even after the government flew his remains to Dera Bugti on September 1, 2006 the public was not allowed to have a look at the last remains of Nawab Bugti. His remains were buried in a locked and sealed coffin, opened only briefly to allow the *maulvi* leading the funeral to take a look.⁹

Nawab Bugti – A Chequered Career

The octogenarian Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, the tribal chief of the largest Baloch tribe, the Bugtis, had epitomised the Baloch resistance to the military regime during the ongoing insurgency, especially since the clashes in January 2005 in Sui. His killing seems to have re-galvanised the Baloch nationalists. An alumnus of Aitchison College Lahore and Oxford, Nawab Bugti a relatively late entrant into the Baloch nationalist struggle. In fact, until he fell out with the establishment, he was rather considered a collaborator by the mainstream Baloch nationalists for his willingness to cooperate with Islamabad during the previous phases of the Baloch insurgency. He was also well-known for ruling his subjects with a firm hand, operating private jails and running a medieval feudal justice system in his area. Nawab Bugti is said to have committed his first murder when he was just twelve years old.¹⁰ A suave, articulate but arrogant feudal lord, who claimed complete sovereignty over his subjects, he held his nerves together in the midst of personal tragedies — he lost a number of his sons and grandsons to the assassin's bullets. In spite these bereavements he remained an uncompromising feudal lord, who showed no mercy to his opponents.

He was the first and the only Baloch in the Pakistani cabinet (he held the home and then the defence portfolios) during the first decade of Pakistan's existence and played an enigmatic and controversial role in most of the events in Balochistan. In the 1960s he took an active part in the opposition to the Pakistani government. In the 1970 elections, having been convicted for murder, he was barred from contesting the elections but contributed immensely in terms of his resources and finances towards the

election campaign of the National Awami Party (NAP), led by Khan Wali Khan the son of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, also known as Frontier Gandhi. However, his relationship with NAP leaders changed dramatically after they formed a government in Balochistan. Disappointed at not being named the governor, he turned against the party. Ultimately, it was his public testimony admitting that he had been involved with NAP leaders in a plot to create an independent Balochistan with the help of foreign arms (a claim strongly denied by Ghaus Bux Bizenjo, the Governor and Ataullah Mengal, the Chief Minister), that gave Bhutto the pretext to dismiss the NAP government in 1973.¹¹

He was thereafter appointed as the governor of Balochistan to replace Bizenjo and during this period the guerrilla war against the government intensified. He resigned from the governorship on December 31, 1973 having served for ten months, the same length of time as the NAP had been in power. Despite his subsequent role in precipitating the guerrilla war in Baluchistan, he had not become a separatist and continued his demands for greater autonomy and more resources for Balochistan within Pakistan. By the late 1970s, Bugti, like Bizenjo and Mengal, was demanding a restructured Pakistan, that would give parity to the four provinces in a confederal rather than a federal structure. During the 1980s, in his characteristically provocative and idiosyncratic style, he made a personal protest against Zia-ul-Haq's military regime by refusing to speak Urdu, Pakistan's national language. He resumed speaking it only when elections were held in 1988.¹²

In the 1988 elections, he led the Baloch National Alliance (BNA), a coalition of tribal leaders and left-leaning nationalists and won a large bloc of seats in the provincial assembly. A coalition with the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam brought the BNA to power and made him the chief minister. He held the post until 1990, when new elections were held. For the elections the Nawab established a new political party, the Jamhoori Watan Party (JWP), and continued to dominate politics (electoral and otherwise) in the Bugti area.¹³ Though he could not reclaim the post of chief minister, his party remained a force to be reckoned, with representatives in the provincial assembly as well as in both houses of the parliament. Bugti had been attempting to get all Baloch nationalist parties under one umbrella but his efforts were resisted by other Baloch *Sardars* who did not trust him due to his role in 1973.

Nawab Bugti turned out to be an aggressively defiant politician during the last years of his political life and could not develop a rapport with Musharraf after the latter seized power. He continued with his anti-government resistance from Dera Bugti district, his traditional stronghold and the arena for most of the pitched battles fought between the security forces and Baloch nationalists. In early 2006, when he left Dera Bugti, riding a camel, in the company of a handful of his armed tribesmen for the mountains to fight the security forces, he knew that he would not be shown any mercy if he remained visible.

Impact of Assassination

Nawab Bugti's assassination led to a spontaneous outbreak of violence across Balochistan and in other parts of Pakistan, wherever the Baloch reside in significant numbers. Quetta was the centre of intense protest. Protesters burnt vehicles, banks and petrol pumps and blocked roads. An indefinite curfew had to be clamped in the city. In Kalat, 150 km South of Quetta, a government building was bombed and a telephone exchange set afire. The Baloch nationalists ensured a total shutter down and wheel down strike throughout Balochistan on August 28, 2006. In Karachi, the largest city of Pakistan, riots erupted in all Baloch dominated areas.

The manner in which he met his death has given a huge fillip to the nationalist movement in Balochistan, which had hitherto been largely considered a "renegade movement" restricted to a few *sardars* and their followers. Furthermore, it has brought various tribes that had long been at loggerheads on to one platform. Even Raisani tribe, which has had a running feud with the Bugtis for over a decade in which several members of their families had been killed, has expressed solidarity with the Bugtis.¹⁴ Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, because of the circumstances and the manner of his death, is destined to become a martyr for Baloch nationalism like Nauroz Khan before him, and for all other nationalists fighting for autonomy or independence from Pakistan,¹⁵ despite the military regime's repeated attempts to paint him as an autocratic feudal despot. Musharraf has not only erred in underestimating Baloch nationalism but has now earned the permanent enmity of a significant section of the Baloch population. In his death, Nawab Bugti has probably provided the fractured Baloch polity a rallying point. Ironically, his death may help achieve what he failed during his lifetime – the unity of the Baloch nationalist groups.

The killing of Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti is yet another case of a political assassination that will haunt Pakistani for a long time. It appears to be a case of terrible miscalculation and has weakened Musharraf's position considerably. The killing has been criticised by almost all opposition political parties in Pakistan. What is more surprising is that many top leaders of the ruling party, including two former prime ministers, have termed the incident as unfortunate. The Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), which is a key constituent of the federal government as well as of the Sindh government, has squarely criticised the killing. Even a large number of retired army officers, hitherto close to the regime, have strongly criticised the government over the killing of Bugti.

The incident has triggered a furious reaction in Balochistan and added fuel to an already festering alienation. With the unrest refusing to die down in Balochistan and Baloch nationalist leaders submitting their resignations from the provincial and national legislatures,¹⁶ some of the political leaders even from the ruling PML-Q have expressed their grief at Bugti's death. PML-Q Secretary General Mushahid Hussain, for example, came out with a statement that the killing of Nawab Bugti was sad and unfortunate.¹⁷ But Hussain and other such ruling party leaders, who must have found the incident unwarranted, are political lightweights with no control over the military establishment, which is unaccountable to any civilian institution. Be that as it may, there is little doubt that this incident has greatly weakened the federation of Pakistan¹⁸ and consequently the standing of its all powerful president. Nawab Bugti's death will only strengthen the Baloch nationalists' belief in the futility of negotiating for their rights within the federation.¹⁹

Conclusion

The circumstances under which Akbar Bugti attained martyrdom continue to remain shrouded in mystery, while a number of government spokespersons churn out newer and often contradictory versions of his death,²⁰ thereby indicating the troubled mind of a troubled regime. By eliminating a political leader of Bugti's stature, the military government has unwittingly strengthened the ranks of the militants in Balochistan. The insurgency is not likely to recede, nor will Islamabad manage to dampen Baloch anger in the foreseeable future.²¹ Several people including many innocent Punjabis residing in Balochistan have been killed in the violent protests that have not remained confined to Balochistan only. This raises

serious questions about the stability of the country and the future of the federation.

The current insurgency in Balochistan underlines the fragility of the Pakistani State more than 58 years after its creation. If violence in Balochistan intensifies, the Pakistani army will gradually be sucked into a war that will fester and bleed Pakistan. The military leadership seems to have learnt no lesson from history and the events of 1971, which ultimately led to the disintegration of the country.²² According to Karachi-based businessman Fakir S Ayazuddin, the policy-makers in Islamabad would be well advised to read the Hamoodur Rahman Commission report which points to the mindset that led to the loss of half of the country.²³

Over the years, the perception that they are being exploited has steadily grown amongst most of the Baloch population. There is no doubt that the province is not adequately compensated for its natural resources that have been crucial for the development of Pakistan.²⁴ The issues bedeviling Pakistan today are fundamentally the same ones that visited Pakistan in 1971. The Baloch forces may be weaker and fragmented but the underlying grievances are the same as then. The Pakistani army believes that defeating the dissidents this time round would be easier in the absence of a hostile neighbour to provide arms and shelter. This complacency could prove to be a costly mistake.²⁵ Pakistan with the mindset of a colonial power has been using force and coercion to browbeat the Baloch into submission, but the Pakistani Army, with 70,000 troops in Waziristan and six brigades deployed in Balochistan, is already overstretched.²⁶ Moreover many of the other ethnic minorities are coming out in support of the Baloch.

According to an editorial in the weekly *Newsline*, "Crushing the rebellion (as opposed to quelling the riots) will not be an easy task, as the Baloch are not alone in their struggle. Apart from gaining moral support within the country, they are reportedly acquiring material support from external sources."²⁷ In fact, an independent Balochistan is being seen as a future reality by some US experts already. A paper recently published in the *US Armed Forces Journal* not only recommends redrawing the borders of the Middle East but also speaks of an independent Balochistan.²⁸ The future course would depend on whether the Pakistani Army would step back and implement the recommendations on Balochistan made by the high profile parliamentary committee in 2005, or choose confrontation and set the country on a disastrous course.²⁹

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