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The Battle for Balochistan

 By **Massoud Ansari** 17 SEPTEMBER 2006 NO COMMENT

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As soon as news of Nawab Akbar Bugti's death broke, mobile phone screens across the country registered a blitz of SMS messages, mourning, conjecturing and a few, celebrating the demise of Pakistan's most controversial tribal sardar. But even those that saw him as a trouble-maker had to concede that if not in life, in death the Nawab was a hero.

The manner in which he met his death – the details are still shrouded in controversy – gave a huge filip 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 brought various tribes that had long been engaged in bloody feuds with one another on to one platform.

“You know what Bugti did to us, but all that is now irrelevant,” said Nawab Haji Lashkari, a chieftain of the Raisani tribe, which had been at war with Nawab Akbar Bugti's tribe for the last decade.

“His killing is terrible news for the entire Baloch nation. In our culture, even if we are embroiled in bloody feuds, when we are attacked by an outsider, we become one.”

Lashkari added that Akbar Bugti's murder was a clear message: “If you ask for your rights, you will be killed,’ and if this is the case, then yes, we are ready to be killed,” he declared. And as if echoing this sentiment, virtually every Baloch leader not only condemned the manner in which Nawab Akbar Bugti was killed, but also made it implicitly, if not overtly clear, that if the need arises they are ready to rise to the occasion.

It is not merely the Baloch who are up in arms. The opposition has cashed in on the outrage engendered by the Bugti killing by declaring it an example of government suppression and ineptitude. And to make matters harder for the government, no politician from the ruling Pakistan Muslim League has publicly supported Bugti's death, with some even publicly condemning it.

Even the government's spin doctors have been unable to manufacture any face-saving device. This has caused visible nervousness in government circles and deep embarrassment to President General Pervez Musharraf. For the first time since he seized power in a coup in 1999, Musharraf and the army are under siege.

Just how delicate matters can be gauged by the fact that when violence erupted in the province following Nawab Bugti's death, the government-backed leaders of the ruling party in Balochistan, who were asked to handle the issue, clearly communicated to Islamabad that the mishandling of the case had placed them in a very difficult situation. They contended that if they propagated the government position or attempted to do a whitewash of how Bugti had been killed, their lives would be in danger.

Even the Balochistan Chief Minister, Jam Yusuf of Lasbela, who as provincial leader had no choice but to call a press conference on the insistence of Islamabad, had his cronies request the journalists present not to ask tough questions. The ones that were fielded were answered evasively, and ultimately the event yielded little more than a pre-worded statement confirming Nawab Akbar Bugti's death.

The concerns of Jam Yusuf and the other pro-government leaders in the Balochistan government are valid. When a ghaibana namaz-e-janaza (ritual prayers said at the time of burial) was held at the Ayub Stadium in Quetta, and some Pakistan Muslim League (Q) leaders attempted to attend the meet, they were asked by the masses to leave the ground immediately or be prepared to “face the consequences.”

The government has certainly not helped its own case, issuing statements, then retracting them and issuing fresh ones completely contradicting the earlier ones.

Soon after news of Akbar Bugti's demise broke on August 26, the federal minister for information, Mohammed

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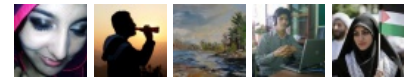
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Ali Durrani not only confirmed the death, but said the resistance offered by Nawab Bugti's men was so intense that arresting him alive was not even remotely possible. "The operation started on August 23 when one of the two helicopters sent on a tip-off about the presence of renegades in the Taratani area of Kohlu district came under fire. Another helicopter was hit by enemy fire shortly afterwards. The operation intensified on August 26 as the militants, operating out of heavily fortified bunkers, employed high-tech weaponry and killed seven security officials," declared Durrani.

At this juncture, the government had obviously not anticipated what a trigger this news would prove. When violence erupted across Balochistan, the government immediately backtracked from its earlier statement, and declared there was never an intent to kill Nawab Akbar Bugti, and the army soldiers who were deployed to apprehend him had been categorically ordered to "capture him alive."

Showing journalists the images of the mountains where the operation was launched, Major General Shaukat Sultan, the top spokesman of the army, now told mediemen that when some army personnel sought to enter the cave where Nawab Bugti was apparently hiding, they were assailed by heavy fire from inside. "They naturally returned fire and then something in the cave exploded. As a result, the cave collapsed, killing not only the servicemen at its mouth but also the inmates," declared the general.

Shaukat Sultan disclosed that the cave was about 100 feet long and had winding passages. Ironically, even while the government announced that because the cave had completely collapsed and turned into a huge heap of debris, it could take several days to retrieve the bodies of Akbar Bugti and the tribesmen who had perished with him, just a day later Shaukat Sultan told newsmen that nearly 100 million rupees, \$96,000 (USD) in cash, two satellite phones, documents, eight AK-47 rifles and some rockets were found in the rubble. This left many wondering how all of these were so easily accessible considering the cave was, by the authorities own reckoning, virtually impossible to negotiate at that point.

That was not the end of the story. Five days after his death, Major General Shaukat Sultan announced that the Nawab's badly decomposed body had been recovered from his cave hideout. However, to lend further credence to conspiracy theories regarding the manner in which he had been killed, Bugti's body was not handed over to his family for identification or burial. Although the government did reportedly ask the Nawab's sons to come to Dera Bugti for the purpose, Jamil Bugti stated the family wanted the body to be brought to Quetta because, since the government had brought and settled a large number of their enemies in Dera Bugti and destroyed much of Akbar Bugti's property, there was nothing left for them to go back to, let alone bury their father there.

Citing the deteriorating condition of the corpse as the need for a hasty burial, official sources maintain that a local maulana identified Akbar Bugti and just hours after retrieving the body, performed his last rites. Then, in the presence of 16 locals and officials the Nawab was buried in a closed casket in his ancestral graveyard in Dera Bugti next to his younger brother, Ahmed Nawaz Bugti, and close to his grandfather, Nawab Shahbaz Khan Bugti, and son, Nawabzada Saleem Bugti.

Intriguingly, while people were disallowed from seeing Akbar Bugti's corpse, because, the authorities insisted, it was mutilated virtually beyond recognition by the rubble collapsing on him, the nawab's watch and glasses, which were subsequently handed over to his sons, miraculously had not even a scratch on them.

Startling disclosures about Nawab Akbar Bugti's death by reliable sources tell an interesting story – and one completely at variance with the official version.

According to these reports, the government launched its operation against the Bugtis on August 23 in the Taratani area of Kohlu district. Nawab Akbar Bugti, who was in the area, was reportedly asked to vacate the location within three days and told to command his men to surrender. However, the Nawab not only refused to leave the area, but allegedly abused the army officials. He did, however, reportedly give his comrades a choice: those who wanted to leave were free to do so, but those who stayed should be prepared to fight to the end. According to the information gleaned, some men left at this juncture, while over a dozen chose to stay and fight. Ironically, all those who left were later arrested by the army. On August 26, when army officials reached the cave in which Bugti and his men were staked out – ostensibly just to arrest him at this point – he reportedly chose to fight, leading from the front.

Nawab Akbar Bugti was allegedly killed along with several of his men in the battle, in which there was heavy firing. However, some of his tribesmen who survived the first round, presumably because they were deeper inside the cave, continued to fight, and in this round at least 17 army officials, including two colonels, two majors and other junior army personnel were reportedly killed. Later, army officials reportedly used a gunship helicopter to finish the few remaining tribesmen who had emerged and their corpses were subsequently dumped inside the cave.

It has been widely conjectured but not confirmed that Akbar Bugti's body was transported to Quetta the same day he was killed and kept in a mortuary at the Combined Military Hospital (CMH) there. However, sensing how combustible the situation was, the authorities could not go public with this information.

Although, presumably in a bid to quell all the rumours surrounding his death, the government has repeatedly offered to allow Akbar Bugti's sons to come to Dera Bugti, have their father's body exhumed and conduct a DNA test to determine if the corpse is indeed Bugti's, it is probably too little, too late.

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It was not just the final chapter of the Bugti-government face-off that was badly botched by the authorities, but also the negotiations preceding it. The Chaudhry Shujaat and Mushahid Hussain-led delegation that met with Akbar Bugti last year, after hostilities had erupted between the Bugtis and the army in the wake of Dr. Shazia Khalid's alleged rape by an army major in Quetta, had reportedly managed to defuse the situation to a large extent. Nawab Akbar Bugti had reportedly agreed to bury his guns if the government acted on the committee's recommendations, which including paying him compensation of 25 crore rupees for the damage done to his property and that of his people in Dera Bugti.



Rather than paying heed to the recommendations, however, sources disclosed, President Musharraf dug in his heels and opted for a confrontation with the Nawab, reportedly after he was convinced by a top boss of one of the intelligence agencies and the head of a gas company that Bugti was the leader of the Balochistan Liberation Army and was receiving help from assorted foreign countries.

In various speeches Musharraf had often attacked the three Baloch Sardars, Marri, Mengal and Bugti, calling them "corrupt," and holding them responsible for all the problems in Balochistan. However, most of his ire, it seemed, was reserved for Bugti. He was first restricted to his house, then driven out of that, and finally even driven out of his own area, where his opponents were brought and lodged with the blessings and active support of the army. The final nail in the coffin came when two days before he was killed, Akbar Bugti was removed as chief of the tribe, after a jirga of Bugti tribesmen, hand-picked and assembled in Dera Bugti by the government, declared him a "proclaimed offender," and seized his property.

Pushed to the wall, in his twilight years, with little to lose and only a reputation to gain, Bugti now decided to direct a guerrilla campaign against General Musharraf and the army.

There is a general consensus that Nawab Akbar Bugti was never part of the BLA, which aims for an independent Balochistan. Rather, his fight was for a greater share of the province's resources. It is therefore surprising that the government concentrated its energies mainly on the Nawab and the Dera Bugti district, even while attacks were increasing in the rest of the province, especially in the tribal areas.

While it is admittedly not exclusively the Bugti tribe that has felt the wrath of the government, it has been at the forefront of the receiving end of the authorities' actions.

Ever since the army operation started in Balochistan, scores of people have been picked up from across the province by the agencies on charges of "spying for an enemy country" or for their alleged connections with the shadowy BLA, and not been heard of since. Many of these have been Bugtis or had connections with them. Their relatives have lodged FIRs, filed habeas corpus petitions, staged hunger strikes, and held press conferences charging agency sleuths with kidnapping, but to date, this has been of little avail. The missing remain just that.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has stated on record that the military has indiscriminately bombed civilians and launched a campaign of fear in the province, marked by torture, disappearances and custodial killings. And the interior minister has admitted that 4,000 people have been arrested in connection with the Baloch conflict, but no exact figure of those missing is yet available.

One of those reportedly picked by agency sleuths is Abdul Rauf Sasoli, a renowned leader of the Jamhoori Watan party. Earlier this year, he took journalists to Dera Bugti to show them the damage caused by the army in the area, and on February 2, shortly after his return to Karachi where he was residing, he went missing. There has been no news of him since then.

Likewise, Hanif Sharif, a Baloch writer was picked up from Kaich district while sharing a meal with friends at a local restaurant on January 15. Nobody has heard of him thereafter.

Munir Mengal, a TV journalist, was picked up by FIA personnel from Karachi airport on April 7, 2006, shortly after he disembarked from his flight. He had come to Karachi to appoint people for the TV channel 'Voice of Balochistan' that he was planning to launch. His mother has staged hunger strikes and gone to every possible forum to secure the release of her son, but to date he is nowhere to be found.

A Bugti tribesman, who had a post-graduate degree from the Tando Jam Agriculture University in Sindh, was picked up from Quetta after agency operatives discovered Akbar Bugti's telephone numbers in his diary. They kept him blindfolded at a camp for nearly three months, but failing to get any information from him, subsequently released him.

Requesting not to be named for fear of a backlash, the young man disclosed that at the time he was picked up, he was to appear in a viva voce of the provincial commission examination in which he had already qualified. However, because of his illegal confinement during this period he could not appear in the exam, and lost out on a promising career – and a lifelong ambition.



He described how during custody he was subjected to



extreme mental and physical torture, which was perhaps exacerbated by the fact that he had nothing to offer his captors. He could provide them no information about his sardar, the BLA or their alleged training camps. But he was one of the lucky ones – he got away.

There are reportedly dozens of other genuinely apolitical youths like him who have been subjected to similar ordeals which have pushed them into the ranks of the rebels.

According to official estimates, in the past two years, saboteurs have staged nearly 27,000 rocket attacks aimed at military personnel and outposts, government installations and foreign nationals in Balochistan. In 2005, approximately 1,568 “terrorist” attacks have occurred in the province and these attacks have not been confined to the tribal areas.

Government sources maintain that weapons worth 50 crore rupees have been procured from Afghanistan by the “Baloch insurgents” in the past two years to enable them to carry out their guerrilla war.

In his report, ‘The Resurgence of Baluch Nationalism,’ compiled in 2006, Frédéric Grare, a visiting scholar with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, a think tank, says there are three separate but linked issues that bear on Balochistan today: the national question, the role of the army, and the use of Islamism. But he contends that the national question is obviously central.

There has long been frustration amongst the Baloch who have felt virtually colonised by the Punjabi-dominated central government and hold it responsible for the absence of economic and social development in the province, despite the fact that it possesses almost 20 per cent of the country’s mineral and energy resources. Military action against the Baloch by successive governments every time they have raised their voice and demanded their rights has made the people feel further marginalised. This feeling has fomented into real anger that is now spilling over.

Many Baloch grievances are certainly justified. The first deposits of natural gas were discovered in Sui in 1953. Gas was supplied to cities in the Punjab as early as 1964, but Quetta, the capital of Balochistan, had to wait until 1986 for its share of gas – and that too only because at that time the government decided to extend the gas pipeline to provide the facility to the military garrison it had decided to station in the provincial capital.

Similarly, in the Dera Bugti district, home to the gas fields of Sui and Piroh, only the actual town of Dera Bugti is supplied with gas, and here again, it receives its supplies only because a paramilitary camp was opened there in the mid-1990s. Overall, only four of the 26 districts constituting Balochistan are supplied with gas.

Conversely, natural gas is supplied to almost every single village in the Punjab and Sindh. In fact, Punjab today is known as a “The mother of Condensed Natural Gas (CNG) stations,” since almost every car in the province has been converted from a petrol consumer to a CNG one. Meanwhile, there is not a single CNG station in the entire province of Balochistan.

For almost 60 years since independence, 95 per cent of Balochistan has been considered a ‘B-area’, which essentially means that it has been ruled by the levies or semi-private forces of pro-government sardars. Ironically, when the government initiated mega development projects in the province recently, and found the levies force incapable of handling the ‘insurgents,’ it suddenly decided to dispense with their services and bring some areas under the control of the regular administration. However, other areas, where the government had major interests, are likely to come under the vigil of the Pakistan army. The government is now planning to construct military garrisons in the three most sensitive areas of Balochistan – Sui, with its gas-producing installations; Gwadar, with its port; and Kohlu, the “capital” of the Marri tribe, to which most of the nationalist hard-liners belong. The government apparently believes that by establishing these garrisons it will be able to contain the Balochistan insurgency.

The anti-Baloch bias is visible even in the civilian set-up. Most officials working in senior positions in Balochistan belong to the Punjab or other provinces. From chief secretary to inspector general, police, to most government secretaries working in Balochistan, they are all outsiders. “If you visit the Balochistan secretariat, check out the name plates outside each office. You will find virtually no locals running provincial affairs,” Nawab Akbar Bugti would often tell visitors.

The manner in which he was killed, however, proved to be the straw that broke the camel’s back. The government compounded a history of errors against the Baloch by falling into the trap set by Akbar Bugti. He was certainly not the most radical of the sardars. Over the years he had done business with various governments. And in the process he had even been accused by the nationalists of betraying them. But in the end, Bugti decided to redeem himself: he decided to fight for Balochistan – and if that meant to the death, so be it. The manner in which he was eliminated not just immortalised him as a hero, but fueled the fires of Baloch nationalism and separatism.

Since the disgruntled Baloch has always seen the army as the enemy – and the Punjabi and army are seen as synonymous – in the wake of Nawab Akbar Bugti’s killing the Baloch youth have declared a war against all

Punjabis. The victims of this have been the innocent Punjabi settlers who have lived in the province for generations.

Following Akbar Bugti's death, rioters in Balochistan not only destroyed government offices, but also attacked shops owned by Punjabi settlers. So far at least four Punjabis have been killed, and the others, for whom Balochistan is the only home they know, live in terror.

A Punjabi-speaking barber was killed when unidentified people entered his house in Naushki town and fired at him. The attackers escaped from the scene. Around 10 barber shops and a number of government buildings have also been damaged and ransacked in the town. Two teenage Punjabi boys, Shahnam Javed and Umair Akhtar were killed in Smuglli in Quetta city when they were taking a stroll near their house after dinner. And there have reportedly been copycat murders in Karachi: two young Punjabi boys were recently murdered by unknown militants in the Baloch area of Lyari.

Given the sensitivity of the situation and fearing for their lives, Pakistan army jawans took into custody over 30 men from the Punjab who were working as daily wage labourers in the Chagi district of Balochistan, and sent them back to the Punjab.

Following Bugti's death, members of parliament from the Baloch Nationalist Party (BNP) resigned from their seats and some nationalist Baloch leaders, who earlier used to vent their anger privately, have now openly started demanding secession for the province. They say the time has come for a "decisive battle."

Said MNA Rauf Mengal of the BNP, "Now there is no choice but to fight for liberation from Pakistan." Mengal contended that the actions of the "Punjab-dominated establishment" and its "political cronies" had made the people of Balochistan lose all hope that their problems could be resolved through political dialogue.

The mishandling of the Bugti affair has already cost the present government heavily, and today it stands isolated as even members of its coalition have distanced themselves. Political analysts believe that this is merely the beginning of a long, hard battle. They predict a full-fledged insurgency in Balochistan, and the deployment of many more troops to crush it, which could bleed both, the army's personnel and resources dry.

"The writing on the wall is clear: with army troops already deployed on the eastern and western borders, [and new deployment in Balochistan] defence force expenditure will increase, resulting in an increase in the defence budget. Foreign elements will also take advantage of the situation," says Major General (Retd) Talat Masood.

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