

Bugti and the Baloch Cause

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The killing of Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, the rebellious octogenarian tribal chief and leader of the Baloch nationalist Jamhoori Watan Party by state security forces in his mountain hideout marks an important watershed in the troubled history of relations between Baloch political movements, the colonial British Indian empire and the post-colonial Pakistani state. The circumstances leading up to his death and the events following from it also reveal something about the contradictions within the establishment.

It was learnt late in the evening of August 26 that Akbar Bugti had been killed in the hills of Kohlu district in the Marri tribal area. Bugti who had led his tribal followers into a confrontation with the Pakistan security forces was forced to leave his home in Dera Bugti following an escalation of hostilities in which his house was attacked by rockets. The area of his tribal influence includes the gas-rich Sui region of Balochistan, which accounts for just under half of all natural gas produced in Pakistan. Obituaries filled column inches describing Akbar Bugti's character – hospitable, straightforward, ruthless, cruel, charming, violent, opportunistic and honour-bound. While he spent most of his life playing out the role of a hard-bargaining but ultimately pliant 'sardar' (tribal chief), his defiance of the military regime had turned him into a symbol of the "Baloch cause".

The manner of Akbar Bugti's death elevated him to the pantheon of Baloch heroes and martyrs that provide sustenance to a political identity that produces rebellion with remarkable regularity. Strikes were immediately observed across Balochistan, particularly in all of the Baloch majority areas.

There was a strong reaction also in the poor working class slums of old Karachi as well as other Baloch neighbourhoods and urban villages around the city. For many of the upscale denizens of the metropolis this was a first realisation of the ancient and ubiquitous Baloch presence in their midst. If Akbar Bugti's killing had sparked fury, the handling of his remains provoked outrage. For days the government denied having possession of the body. It then claimed to have found the remains under the rubble of the collapsed cave where the old chief had hidden. Finally, a sealed coffin was taken by military helicopter to Dera Bugti – a town now under the control of a rival Bugti sub-tribe – where it was buried in Akbar Bugti's ancestral graveyard without anyone from his own family being present. This act was widely interpreted across the country as a desecration of the body.

The 'Baloch' Cause

What is the "Baloch cause"? Why did it prove so intractable, that Akbar Bugti, a former governor and chief minister of Balochistan, who had taken an oath of loyalty to the state of Pakistan on several occasions as a member of national legislature, had to die? And why, intriguingly, did the government commit such blunders with the dead sardar's body? General Musharraf's narrative on Balochistan revolves around "development" and the "writ of the state". The tribal chiefs are enemies of development, they hold their own people hostage, perpetuate a culture of backwardness, and defy the writ of the state. In the general's words – that sometimes take on tones of Bushism – those who defy the writ of the state "will be fixed" and "won't know what has hit them".

His government, Musharraf can claim with some justification, has increased public investment in Balochistan manifold – mainly in the construction of a new port close to the Persian Gulf at Gwadar, national highways linking that port with other parts of the country, and other supporting infrastructure. All of these developments threaten the hold that the tribal chiefs have over their people and the rebellion is a futile last-ditch attempt at stopping change. Akbar Bugti was "fixed", and according to initial reports he indeed did not know what hit him – the latter being an allusion to advanced rocket navigation technology allegedly used by the security forces against the tribal insurgents.

The problem with Musharraf's colonial narrative on Balochistan, however, is that there are many even in the Pakistani mainstream who simply do not believe it. In one of his last interviews Akbar Bugti said that the Baloch fight was about "lajja, namoos, izzat, ghairat" (a blend of honour, dignity, respect and sanctity) which he believed was the most important possession of the Baloch. Having established these psycho-cultural parameters he quickly moved to "rights and resources". The "Baloch cause" in a nutshell is about the terms on which Baloch people will engage with development. It is about a feeling of marginalisation, as well as about simple "mundane" issues like jobs, control over land, dispossession at the hands of migrants, and lack of participation in the use of Balochistan's natural and strategic resources.

Did general Musharraf miss or relish the irony of inaugurating the supply of Sui Gas (from Balochistan) to a hill station in northern Punjab the day after Akbar Bugti's killing? In either case, it is clear that the "Baloch cause" narrative has wide resonance in the province and not just among followers of tribal chiefs but among urban middle classes, non-sardar regions such as Makran, Baloch working class youth in Karachi, and the sizeable Baloch diaspora in west Asia. The lead-up to Akbar Bugti's killing as well as its immediate handling indicates that there is much greater understanding of the "Baloch cause" even within the Pakistani establishment than Musharraf's "fix them" paradigm suggests.

In fact, there have been repeated attempts at negotiation over the last two years in order to accommodate issues pertaining to the "Baloch cause". The most significant move was initiated by Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain, the leader of the governing Pakistan Muslim

League, during his brief stint as a transitional prime minister last year. Shujaat is a quintessential deal-maker from central Punjab, whose career is based on purely transactional politics. He, nevertheless, felt a personal connection with Akbar Bugti who as governor of Balochistan had shown kindness to Shujaat's father while the latter had been incarcerated in the notorious Machh prison in the 1970s. Shujaat entered the fray at a time when there had already been an attempt to assassinate Akbar Bugti – security forces shelled his house in Dera Bugti killing several people and missing him narrowly.

Parliamentary committees were set up with terms of reference which included the possibility of recommending constitutional change. The matters that these committees were mandated to discuss included immediate security issues – such as the deescalation of the standoff between state security forces and Bugti tribal militias – but also wider-ranging problems such as the question of jobs for locals, a renegotiation of Balochistan's mineral and natural gas royalties, provincial fiscal awards, domicile conditions for voter registration, a legal bar on non-local landownership, and the acquisition of land for military cantonments and other establishments. The parliamentary committees and the negotiators obviously proceeded on the premise that all of these various concerns connected with the "Baloch cause" could be resolved within the federal framework of Pakistan.

Many Twists and Turns

After a brief lull the military situation escalated amidst mutual recriminations. The "fix them" paradigm had taken over again, and the events on August 26 had been foretold by the main protagonists themselves. Akbar Bugti had said some months before that it was better to die fighting up in the mountains than on a sickbed. He got his wish. Musharraf, also true to his words had "fixed" Akbar Bugti, who according to one account, may "not have known what hit him". But the confusion surrounding the precise circumstances of Akbar Bugti's death, and the inexplicable desecration of the body reveal that "fix them" may not be the last word in this struggle.

The first report suggested that Akbar Bugti who had taken refuge in the Marri tribal area had been located through the tracking of his satellite telephone. It was thought that advanced navigated rockets had been deployed from helicopters to attack and destroy his base, thus killing him. Then these early reports were followed up by accounts that helicopters had dropped army commandos who located and attacked the insurgents, losing many men before finally overcoming the resistance. It was

not clear if anyone had been taken alive. It might be recalled that general Musharraf prides himself on his own commando background, and his first public reaction was to congratulate the troops on a "mission accomplished".

The story took the opposite turn quite quickly, however, as civilian spokespersons for the government started to suggest that the commandos had, in fact, been sent to arrest Akbar Bugti alive but that they faced such fierce firepower that they were forced to fire back in order to protect themselves, and that Akbar Bugti died in that firefight. The civilian spokespersons – including Chaudhry Shujaat immediately expressed sorrow at the killing and suggested that it was an unfortunate outcome rather than an operational objective. The story then changed again, as the government fenced demands by Bugti's sons for the handover of their father's remains. Now it was said that the government did not, in fact, possess the body and that it was buried under the rubble of a collapsed cave. This immediately raised questions about the recovery of the bodies of the troops who had died and had been given military funerals.

An altogether new version of the incident emerged. The army commandos, it was revealed, had used "turned" Bugti guides to take them to the sardar's hideout. These guides were sent inside the cave to negotiate Akbar Bugti's surrender. The army personnel waited at the mouth of the cave. When the guides returned from inside to confirm the sighting of the sardar, an "unexplained explosion" blew up the inside of the cave, and also killed the army personnel who were at the cave's entrance. Hence, the bodies of the military men were recovered, while Akbar Bugti's body remained buried under the rubble. In the end, however, Bugti's body was never handed over to his sons, and was buried in their absence under armed guard.

This entire macabre episode, with its various turns and twists, simply fuelled suspicion of all official accounts of Akbar Bugti's killing. Bizarre though it appears, there is more to it than sheer incompetence, clumsiness, or even malice. The dead sardar's body is likely to bear witness to what actually happened on August 26. It is obviously infantile to believe that the military operation was ordered, and its objectives set, by the likes of Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain or even the hapless Shaukat Aziz. These men have precious little control over civil matters and it would be fanciful to believe that they could even get close to decision-making in military operations. Anyone paying attention to the words and deeds of general Musharraf over the last two years, however, ought not to be surprised that Akbar Bugti was "fixed". The confused official accounts, and even the desecration of the body are all part of the

elaborate charade that needed to be played in order to conceal this basic fact.

If the self-contradiction of the official storyline is reminiscent of the Pakistan government's bewildered communication style during the Kargil war of 1999, there is good reason for it. Then too, negotiation-minded mainstream civilian politicians – that is, people who were not opposed to war in principle, but found it disempowering and inconvenient from their standpoint – were forced to publicly explain military actions over which they had little control.

The question is: why the impossible charade to maintain the incredible line that Akbar Bugti was not targeted? Supporters of the "Baloch cause" will always uphold Akbar Bugti as a martyr regardless of whether he was killed deliberately or died accidentally during an operation to arrest him. Likewise, those who believe in Musharraf's narrative on Balochistan would shed no tears for Akbar Bugti either way. What made it necessary for the civilian politicians from central Punjab and elsewhere who are fronting the military regime (and benefiting from it) to persist with the negotiation line even after Akbar Bugti was dead? These characters can hardly be counted among supporters of the "Baloch cause".

Some of the reasons could be gauged from the analogies that were used to make sense of the situation in Balochistan. One was the spectre of 1971 (liberation of Bangladesh) – in other words, the futility of a military response to ethno-nationalist challenges. Another common reference was to the long-term political costs of the execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Both these "ghosts" from Pakistan's past appear to weigh heavily on the psyche of the political classes. Perhaps there are other reasons too. Existing political players in Pakistan have now increasingly come to believe that they will be in business for a long time – over generations, in fact. They also have reason to believe the same about other players including their rivals. There are many on the political scene who were branded as traitors at one time and then welcomed back into power – there is reason, therefore, to always keep channels of communication open, and to avoid creating lasting vendettas.

The killing of Akbar Bugti has infused a sense of urgency into the "Baloch cause". The state's response might lead to further escalation with unpredictable consequences. The middle ground does not belong, however, to the "fix them" brigades. Mainstream political culture in Pakistan has gravitated towards negotiation, even as it is kept to the margins of actual power by the military. **EPW**

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