

ARTICLES  
Pakistan A country unravels

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Pakistan Killing political opponents rather than talking to them is a sure signal of a government's weakness and desperation. Such is the case with the killing of the Baluch tribal chief Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti on Saturday by the Pakistan Army.

For many Pakistanis, the death of Bugti is one thread torn loose, as Pakistan's dangerous political and social unraveling under military rule continues.

Aircraft bombed Bugti's hideout in the mountains of Baluchistan province, killing him, his grandson and an estimated 37 of his bodyguards. A battle took place against Pakistani commandos in which 20 soldiers were killed. Within hours, news of his death sparked riots and a curfew in all major towns in Baluchistan, as well as Karachi.

Bugti, 79, a hard-line Baluch nationalist, was a fugitive after having being forced out of his hometown of Dera Bugti last year by the army.

For the past four years, Baluch nationalists have waged an intermittent guerrilla war against the army under the auspices of the Baluchistan Liberation Army, which has been banned by Pakistan and Britain. In the past few days fighting had intensified as the army mounted air and commando assaults on rebel camps in the mountains. The insurgents damaged at least one U.S.-supplied helicopter gunship.

Bugti, however, was the spokesman for the nationalists, and not the leader of the Baluchistan Liberation Army. Last year he was more than willing to negotiate a compromise solution to Baluchistan's problems, on the basis of a proposal put forward by some leaders of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League.

The agreement would have ended most of the Baluch grievances, such as a desire for greater autonomy and more income from the vast gas fields in Baluchistan that provide 45 percent of Pakistan's gas supplies. But the army spurned the peace proposals and decided to go in for the kill.

The crisis in remote Baluchistan reflects many of Pakistan's current problems. The country's largest province, it is arid and sparsely populated, but its strategic location bordering Iran, Afghanistan and the Arabian Gulf makes it vital to security in the region.

Through Bugti's death, the army is sending a message to neighboring India and Afghanistan, which it has accused of arming and financing the Baluch rebels - charges both countries deny. The proxy war between Pakistan on one side, and India and Afghanistan, which charge Pakistan with helping Kashmiri militants and the Taliban, will now escalate.

Baluchistan has vast oil, gas and mineral deposits, which Pakistan, otherwise starved of resources, is keen to exploit. The Baluch, who have waged four unsuccessful insurgencies against the army since 1947, have been demanding a fair share of the profits and development funds, and political representation.

The issue of provincial autonomy - a fair economic deal for the three smaller provinces and less domination by Punjab, the largest province, from where most of the army is drawn - has plagued Pakistan since the 1971 separation of East Pakistan, now Bangladesh.

Pakistan's military rulers have continued to ignore the fact that the country is a multiethnic, multireligious state where the unitary policies of an overly centralized military do not work. The lack of democracy since Musharraf's military coup in 1999 is only increasing the anger and alienation felt by Sindhis, Pashtuns, Urdu-speaking Muhajirs and a host of smaller nationalities.

For many Pakistanis, Bugti's death is a harsh reminder of the death of another politician at the hands of an earlier military ruler - the hanging of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1979. The killing of Bugti, an avowed secularist who mocked the Taliban, is also a revealing glimpse of how the military regime treats secular politicians, while it has molycoddled extremist Islamic leaders.

Even before the killing, the government was under siege by a rejuvenated opposition made up of Islamic and national political parties, which have brought a no-confidence motion against the government in Parliament. Bugti's death is likely to unite politicians of all political persuasions, including many in the ruling party who have been shocked and dismayed by the military's high-handedness.

The unraveling of the Musharraf era is picking up pace. The army now needs to let go and help Pakistan's politicians map out a path toward an acceptable democracy for a nation that is critical to the world's stability.