

## Rebel Killing Raises Stakes In Pakistan

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By Ahmed Rashid

**Guest journalist Ahmed Rashid assesses what the killing of a rebel tribal leader in Balochistan province means for the Baloch rebel movement and for the Pakistani government.**

In his death and the manner in which it was carried out, Sardar Akbar Bugti is likely to become a martyred hero for Baloch nationalism and nationalists elsewhere in Pakistan - rather than the anti-government renegade and reactionary tribesman Islamabad would like to portray him as.

Bugti, the Sardar or chief of more than 200,000 Bugti tribesmen, was killed along with more than 35 of his followers when the Pakistan Air Force bombed his hideout in the Bambore mountain range in the Marri tribal area.

Pakistani officials say that at least 16 soldiers including four officers were killed after they went in to mop up the remnants of the Baloch guerrilla group. A fierce battle ensued which led to their deaths.

Bugti, a 79-year-old invalid who could not walk due to arthritis, is reported to be buried in the rubble of the cave where he was hiding.

**The tit-for-tat proxy war between Pakistan on one side and India and Afghanistan on the other will now heat up**

For months, Pakistani politicians including members of the ruling party had been insisting that the military regime agree to hold talks with the Baloch leaders in order to stop what was becoming an ever-widening civil war in the province.

Several security agencies and advisers to President Pervez Musharraf, including the Interservices Intelligence (ISI) and Intelligence Bureau, asked Musharraf to talk to the Baloch leaders.

However, other advisers and the hawkish Military Intelligence advised him to crush the Baloch leaders, which includes three prominent Sardars, Bugti, Khair Bux Marri and Atallah Mengal.

Senior politicians say that Mr Musharraf's lack of understanding about the Baloch issue, his underestimation of the growing sense of alienation in all the smaller provinces and the attack on his ego when his helicopter was fired upon by Baloch rebels last December, all contributed to his helping him take the decision to kill Bugti.

### Permanent enmity

Bugti was not the leader of the mysterious Balochistan Liberation Army which has been banned by Pakistan and Britain, but he was certainly its most visible spokesman over the past three years, as the Baloch insurgency against Islamabad has grown.

The army has attempted to divide the Baloch by promising large aid grants to those tribal leaders who support the government, even as Islamabad claims that it is eliminating the Sardari system.

Baloch nationalists have long argued that while Islamabad exploits their massive gas and mineral deposits, they give little in return to the province.

Last year, the ruling Pakistan Muslim League agreed on a package of incentives for the Baloch that included a constitutional amendment giving greater autonomy to the province, but it was overruled by Mr Musharraf and the army who then vowed to militarily crush the rebellion.

The army argues that millions have been spent in development, but projects such as the building of the Gawadar port, the building of cantonments and even new roads do not necessarily benefit ordinary Baloch.

The projects are defined by the army and its national security needs, rather than through consultations with the Baloch or even the Balochistan provincial assembly. Then the projects are carried out by outside companies who give few jobs to the Baloch.

By killing Bugti, the president has now earned the permanent enmity of not just the Baloch rebels but the wider Baloch population who may not believe in taking up arms, but are still frustrated with Islamabad for its failure to develop the province.

He may have seriously underestimated the power of Baloch nationalism which has led to four wars with the Pakistan army in the past.

Nationalism within the smaller provinces has always been the biggest threat to military regimes just as it is to Mr Musharraf.

The hanging of former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1979, who was a Sindhi, by an earlier military ruler has made Sindhis resentful of the army, while they have, by and large, always voted for the opposition Pakistan People's Party.

In the North West Frontier Province where Talebanisation is rampant, Pashtun nationalism is presently taking the form of political Islam.

### **Powerful signals**

By killing Bugti, the army is sending a clear message to nationalists in other provinces as to how they will be dealt with if they rear their heads.

However, the smaller provinces are seething with resentment against continued military rule. Their sense of frustration and alienation is growing as they see the army representing only its own interests or that of Punjab, the largest province in the country.

The army is also sending a powerful signal to neighbouring India and Afghanistan.

The army has accused India of financing and arming the Baloch rebels, while it has accused Afghan President Hamid Karzai of allowing the Baloch to train in Afghanistan.

India and Afghanistan have denied these charges at the highest level, but Pakistani officials say there is little doubt that the Indians were involved in funding the Baloch movement because of their long-standing involvement with the Baloch and the evidence that arrested Baloch rebels have provided the Pakistani intelligence services.

The tit-for-tat proxy war between Pakistan on one side and India and Afghanistan on the other, will now heat up.

India accuses Pakistan of continuing to arm and finance Islamic extremists in Kashmir and funding anti-government and Maoist movements in other parts of the Indian sub-continent.

Afghanistan accuses Pakistan of arming and giving sanctuary to the Taleban and its leadership.

Pakistan denies both charges.

There is an ever-deepening political crisis in Pakistan which the death of Bugti will only exacerbate.

Many people say that the country is rapidly unravelling with Mr Musharraf refusing to give clear-cut guarantees about free and fair elections next year, while he insists on running again for another five-year term as president even as he remains army chief.

Bugti's death will only add to the growing fears about the country's future and the danger inherent in a policy of killing political opponents rather than holding a dialogue with them.