



Pakistan Study Group Unravelling Pakistan: Threats to Stability

Session 2: Triggers for Collapse – insurgency and separatism

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• **Introduction**

The session opened with an analysis of the current situation in Balochistan and the tribal areas of Waziristan, focussing on recent developments and outlining potential avenues for quelling the insurgency. In addition, we were provided with a broader framework to assess the long-term causes of separatism in the context of fraught centre-state relations in Pakistan.

• **Background to regional and ethnic fissures in Pakistan**

Pakistan's history since 1947 is littered with examples of domestic instability, including a civil war that resulted in the secession of East Pakistan - the country's most populous province - in 1971. Four inter-linked issues stand out as barriers to Pakistan's nation-building exercise, and explain (to some extent) why Pakistan has been less successful than India in accommodating difference:

1. weak political institutions and the absence of representative rule
2. lack of a political culture of accommodation
3. centralised power, which frustrates regional elites excluded from power at national level
4. imbalance in the ethnic make-up of the army, as well as the bureaucracy and other un-elected state institutions.

With the addition of economic scarcity and uneven regional development, Pakistan finds itself in an inescapable cycle of instability. These factors have formed the basis of most of the country's regional uprisings, from the secession of East Pakistan to the current insurgency in Balochistan. The conclusion arising from this broadly centrist perspective was that ethnic identification in Pakistan is not a matter of primordial loyalties but rather a question of access to a share of power.

1. *Weak political institutionalisation*

Institutional weakness is exemplified by a proliferation of parties that are organised around personalities rather than issues and that tend to adopt a zero-sum approach to difference. These factors are further aggravated by the absence of internal

democracy, corruption, factionalism, and the persistence of clientelism. Their roots in Pakistan lie in an underdeveloped civil society, which itself grew out of the colonial inheritance and prolonged periods of post-independence authoritarian rule.

Colonial administration bolstered the traditional leaders of rural society, such as the *sardars* (tribal chiefs), the Khans (landed tribal leader) of Balochistan and the NWFP, the *waderos* (major landowners) of Sind, and the feudal lords and *pirs* (spiritual masters) of the Punjab. The British administrators devolved a great deal of administrative power to these leaders, but this did not involve political representation. The Muslim League, therefore, had to accommodate these leaders in order to gain support in the run-up to independence. This meant that unlike the Congress Party in India, it was unable to establish a mass base at a grassroots level, or develop a Pakistan-wide sense of identity that could override regional linguistic and ethnic differences. Consequently, attention was directed away from constructing political bodies, and towards military and bureaucratic instruments for administering control.

2. *Absence of Political Accommodation*

Powerholders in Pakistan have consistently failed to accept the legitimacy of opposition. The roots of this weakness can be found before independence, when the colonial administration operated under a policy of 'divide and rule', playing off groups and communities against each other and strengthening local leaders in areas that had no political representation at all. The shift from this system to the formation of a nation-state was not smooth, and in fact, the policy has to some extent continued in a different guise. In addition, the impact of a feudal class contributed to an emphasis on tribal and kin loyalty at a local level. Furthermore, though the middle class has been growing for some years now, there has been no development of middle class political parties. A final factor is the underdevelopment of civil society (another legacy of the colonial era), which has hindered the articulation and aggregation of interests.

The consequences of weak political institutions are that they create the conditions for chaos, which can then be used as a justification for military coups. This has allowed the army to seize control by claiming that its intervention was necessary to maintain stability. However, prolonged authoritarian rule only serves to undermine the political institutions further, thus becoming a causal factor of the fragility.

3. *Centralisation*

The Pakistan movement was premised on the fear of centralised rule by a Hindu-dominated Congress. Once Pakistan was created, however, the Muslim League pursued its own centralised rule in the name of nation building. Provincialist sentiments and loyalties were seen as a barrier to the latter. Since then, the centre has continually rejected demands for increased provincial autonomy throughout Pakistan's history. Centralisation reached its peak in 1956 with the introduction of the 'One Unit' scheme, which established parity between East and West Pakistan. It was hotly contested as an attempt to restrict Bengali representation in national politics and also fuelled anger in smaller provinces like Balochistan, where ensuing tension formed part of the reason for the 1958 coup.

4. *Ethnic imbalance*

The real and perceived domination of Punjabis in the army and bureaucracy has fuelled a great deal of frustration amongst Pakistan's smaller provinces and ethnic groups. The state is commonly perceived by Baloch nationalists (and previously by

Bengali nationalists) as existing to maintain the strength of Punjabis. The preponderance of Punjabis in the army is a consequence of colonial practice – the British army specifically recruited them from the 1880s onwards. It is unsurprising that anti-Punjab sentiment is more commonplace in times of military rule. Furthermore, due to the higher education levels of Punjabis in relation to Pashtuns and Balochs, they were found in large numbers within the Indian Civil Service, which later became the backbone of the civil bureaucracy in India and Pakistan.

It must be noted however that Punjab and the Punjabi community are not homogenous or monolithic, nor is the extent of their domination as pronounced as some analysts have suggested. To demonstrate this heterogeneity, some participants at the session suggested that Punjab could quite easily be divided into three distinct parts with headquarters in Multan, Rawalpindi, and Lahore. Its advantage would be not only to correct the perceived imbalance in power but also to garner support among regions that have fallen behind the rest of the province. However it was recognised that, in reality, tinkering with administrative units could serve to create new claims for representation and increase the number of local power bases. Nevertheless, it was worth considering if only to combat the notion of a 'monolithic Punjab'.

- **Background to provincial grievances in Balochistan**

The Khan of Kalat handed over to the British the areas that were to form the Political Agency in 1876, for strategic reasons. Unlike the NWFP, British Balochistan did not make the transition from a Chief Commissioner's to a Governor's Province. Instead, the British formalised the powers of the tribal *jirgas* (councils), which bolstered the position of the *sardars* (tribal chiefs). Economic development in the northern Balochistan regions was stimulated by the construction of roads and railways, which linked the Zhob district with Punjab from 1895 onwards. The emphasis on protecting and accessing the Afghanistan border meant that infrastructural developments favoured the Pashtun areas, rather than the Brahui-speaking and Baloch populations. The preference of rail over camel caravan for transporting goods to the coast, and a lack of links between southern Balochistan and the rest of India, also contributed to significant regional disparities in economic development. Therefore, the roots of Baloch grievances can be found in the colonial era, which bolstered the strength of the *sardar* class, accentuated regional economic inequalities, and intensified competition between the Baloch and resident Pashtuns.

In August 1947, the Khan of the princely state of Kalat declared independence, arguing that once the British left, it should be restored as a fully sovereign and independent nation. The new Pakistani government, however, marched on Kalat in April 1948, which pressured the Khan into accession after just 225 days of independence. During the 1950s and 1960s, the demand for independence remained alive, though violent nationalist uprisings were sporadic.

Due to the inability of the Pakistan state to accommodate ethnic and regional demands, the aspirations of civilian leaders of Balochistan in the 1970s were not treated as legitimate claims, but as a law and order problem. It must be noted that Balochistan only achieved provincial status in 1970, and gained its first representative government, led by the National Awami Party (NAP), as late as 1972. However, the central government of the time, under Z. A. Bhutto, resisted the NAP's attempts to strengthen its provincial autonomy by transferring non-Baloch administrative staff. Bhutto's opposition to these policies and his dismissal of the

provincial government were key factors that led to an uprising in the province that lasted from 1973 to 1977. The NAP's claims bore a strong resemblance to the demands of the Awami League in East Bengal with the centre responding in typical fashion by opting for a military crackdown. In this case however the centre's preferred option paid off, for unlike East Bengal where more than half of Pakistan's population at the time put up stiff resistance, the huge army presence in Balochistan involving around 80,000 troops, was able quickly to overcome the estimated 55,000 insurgents and prevent a civil war.

Baloch nationalists have never been co-opted at the national level, unlike the Pashtuns, who emerged early on as junior partners in the state administration (along with the Urdu-speaking Mohajirs). Pashtuns were also (most critically) encouraged to increase their participation in the Punjabi-dominated armed forces, with the aim of neutralizing the threat of a burgeoning Pashtun nationalism. The Baloch did however enjoy some share of power at the provincial level in the 1980s and 1990s, which helped curb the prospect of further unrest. This interregnum has proved to be short-lived. Since 2001 the policies of ruling PML-Q and MMA coalition, which have edged out the Baloch nationalist presence have revived calls for the Balochs to be given a greater say in the administration of their province and control over its natural resources. This, in turn, has led to an increase in ethnic turbulence in the region.

In addition to their systematic exclusion from political representation and power, the Baloch population have also suffered from economic marginalisation, mentioned above as a consequence of its colonial heritage. Balochistan's wealth of natural resources, especially gas, and its strategic position along the border with Afghanistan and Iran have encouraged its exploitation, both economically and strategically. Few of the benefits of these advantages however appear to have reached the Baloch people, whose grievances are now fuelling a fresh insurgency.

The exploitation of Balochistan's natural resources is most marked in the case of natural gas around Sui, discovered in 1952. The gas meets 38% of Pakistan's national needs, yet only 6% of Balochistan's 6.5 million people have access to it. Similarly, the Gwardar deep-sea port development project, which enables non-Baloch civil-military elites to access land in Balochistan, has been undertaken without the approval or participation of the provincial government. This has led to fears among some Baloch nationalists, who claim that "outsiders" have swamped their province. It also explains why some Baloch nationalists maintain that they are engaged in an "anti-colonial struggle" against the Pakistani government.

- **Outline of the current insurgency in Balochistan**

There has been violence in Balochistan for approximately the last five years. In 1999/2000, Islamabad started oil and gas exploration in the area under the control of the Marri tribe, causing huge resentment amongst the local population. It led to violence after Marri tribesmen tried to stop the exploration and prevent coal trucks leaving the province. The authorities deployed about one thousand men to quell the violence. Since then, there has been low level conflict, with particular events acting as triggers, such as the cutting off by tribesmen of army water supplies and the rape of a woman doctor in Sui, allegedly by an army officer.

The key issues for the Baloch nationalists are the exploitation of the province's oil and gas resources, as well as the constitutional status of Balochistan. With regard to resource exploitation, most of the focus is currently on the Sui gas installation. The Bugti tribe, which controls the area around Sui, has laid claim to its natural resources,

namely gas, and has accused the government of stealing its wealth. It has demanded a higher proportion of gas revenues, and total control of Sui. The head of the tribe, Nawab Akbar Bugti, is also seeking control of the Gwadar development project.

Current levels of violence remain high. Reports from near Dera Bugti suggest that there have been 480 security incidents in Balochistan between April 2004-April 2005, which translates into an attack of some sort more than once a day. Half of them are said to have been in or around Dera Bugti, including the recent shelling of Nawab Bugti's fort (though he survived). According to Sardar Attaullah Mengal, who heads the Mengal tribe, half the population of Balochistan is behind the insurgents, but only a few hundred people in each area are actively fighting the Pakistani forces. This contrasts with official reports from Quetta, which claim that the insurgents are thousands-strong. Although the Baloch are well armed, especially in the aftermath of the Afghanistan conflict, most fighters still lack heavy weapons such as helicopter gun-ships or tanks. It seems that the army will eventually be able to overwhelm the insurgency, mirroring the outcome of the 1970s conflict, despite Mengal's claim that the Baloch will not allow themselves to be drawn into a pitched battle.

Meanwhile, Chaudhry Shujaat (President of the ruling party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Q) and Mushahid Hussain (Secretary-General of PML-Q) have been attempting to put together a compromise deal. Their success has been modest and there are indications that the talks may be failing. Nevertheless, it is significant that the question of changing the constitution so as to revise the current distribution of powers between the centre and the provinces has not been ruled out. However, the chances of this taking effect are slim, as is the likelihood of an accommodation of current Baloch demands for autonomy and full control over Balochistan's gas reserves.

The development of a province-wide Baloch nationalist movement is a very recent and significant development. Baloch leaders have, in the past, tended to settle their disputes with the centre separately. The establishment of a Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), which has been held responsible for launching attacks against Pakistani forces and mobilising nationalist opinion throughout Balochistan, indicates that the nature of the conflict may be changing. This has complicated the job of the government, because even if it did engage in dialogue and conciliation with individual tribal leaders, this may not appease those who have now come to view the insurgency as predominantly a nationalist-separatist struggle.

The government, therefore, seems to be undertaking both a military and a political-diplomatic approach to Balochistan – neither have worked so far. Given the apparent futility of recent targeted bombings against tribal strongholds and the centre's difficulty in reaching a deal with the new Balochistan Liberation Army, a military 'solution' looks extremely likely. The question, at this stage, is: if the government succeeds in co-opting the Bugtis and some of their tribal allies (as it did the Pashtuns), will the fight for an independent 'Baluchistan' die down?

- **The current situation in the tribal areas of Waziristan**

Since 9/11 Waziristan has become an area of interest for the Pakistani government and its US ally. It is thought to be both a thoroughfare and a breeding-ground for Islamic terrorists, largely because of its proximity to the Afghan border and the strength of the mullahs (clerics) in the province. As a result, the authorities have again taken a two-pronged approach to area, combining military bombardment (mostly in Waziristan) not with dialogue (as in the case of Balochistan), but with pay-

offs to win support. In some tribal areas the federal government has invested in infra-structural development. Since 2001, for example, it has been implementing plans developed over several decades to build a dam in South Waziristan. The Gomal Zam dam project, however, has been disrupted by the current insecurity, which led to the kidnapping in 2004 of two Chinese engineers by militant tribesmen led by the fugitive, Abdullah Mahsud, and the death of one of the engineers following a botched rescue attempt by Pakistani security forces.

From a military perspective, the tribal areas are extremely difficult to penetrate, mainly because fighting on the ground is so difficult due to the inhospitable terrain. Local militants have learnt how to take advantage of this, and arrange themselves so as to encircle army troops. As a result, the tactics of the military have tended to involve aerial bombardment and long-range artillery barrages, which are necessarily less accurate, and therefore often incur civilian casualties. Such fighting has done little to quell the resistance of the tribesmen despite the massive deployment of between Pakistani troops, officially estimated at between 70,000-75,000.

Development in the tribal areas is taking place – for example, hundreds of kilometres of roads have been built around Mohmand, as well as schools and wells. This construction has taken place quickly and efficiently, almost certainly with American financial backing. The schools are extremely basic, and one could question the quality of the education that children receive there. There is also the concern that low levels of rudimentary education create enough aspiration amongst the children, without actually educating them, that they become perfect material for indoctrination by mullahs.

With regard to the construction of vast road networks, it is important to assess the local reaction to this development. While the local people have had a surprisingly positive initial reaction, it is possible that a more pessimistic attitude may develop. If it is perceived that the authorities have put this infrastructure in place solely to improve the ability of the military to track down militants, this will serve to increase local scepticism and frustration. A pertinent question, then, is what are the intentions of the federal government in undertaking such development?

It is clear that the recent interest in the province is a result of the post 9/11 policies of the US and the 'war against terror'. Previously, the Pakistan government has had a policy of non-interference in the tribal areas, but the U-turn since 2001 indicates a change in priorities. The pretext of weeding out terrorists offers the federal government the opportunity to access an area of Pakistan that is seriously under-developed and where humanitarian conditions are extremely poor. The tribal areas are commonly perceived to be beyond education, so this increase in attention is a welcome development. However, the mixture of motives, and perceived hidden agenda, means that a warm reception from the local community cannot be guaranteed.

- **Comparing Balochistan and Waziristan**

Both areas currently face power vacuums as tribal leaders steadily lose their influence. The tribal system has managed to sustain its power to a remarkable degree, both against the British and the central Pakistan government, but the strength of the Maliks in the tribal areas and the sardars in Balochistan is now waning. Amongst the factors contributing to this decline in power is the increased mobility of young men, and greater access to communications and the media such as television, which has exposed an otherwise isolated population to a world beyond

their locality. This, combined with a growing population and pressure on the land from outside, has intensified the frustration of young men in these regions, who are finding it increasingly difficult to establish their own households and livelihoods. Furthermore, the post-9/11 context has fuelled a growth in anti-American sentiment, and has led some of the younger members of the tribal societies to criticise the old-fashioned ways of their elders, and question their ability to challenge American power.

Whilst in Balochistan the call for reform has not yet reached even the bottom ranks of the tribal leadership, in the FATA, voices for change can already be heard close to the top. Outside of the tribes in Balochistan, a power struggle is developing between the *mullahs* (religious leaders) and the nationalists to fill the political vacuum. In this struggle the nationalists currently appear to have gained the upper-hand. In Waziristan, the *mullahs* have already achieved a great deal of success, partly as a result of support over many years from sections of Pakistan's intelligence agencies, notably the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The ISI has exploited its links with the *mullahs* to expand Pakistan's influence among conservative tribesmen across the border in Afghanistan. Extremism is rife in Waziristan, more so than in Balochistan – some Waziris have served time in Guantanamo, others have been radicalised by the presence of foreign militants and by fighting alongside the Taliban. The ambition to launch an attack on Washington is much more apparent in Waziristan than among the Baloch.

This alerts us to another point, which is the lack of international support for Balochi nationalism. In the event of a US attack on Iran, there is a possibility that the Baloch in Iran will be able to attract some attention internationally. However, the chances of a conflict that would also be significant enough to create this degree of awareness, are limited. Furthermore, the Baloch still suffer from an inability to present a united front or to organise a co-ordinated insurgency. Finally, the Baloch are a highly mobile community – there are more Baloch living outside Balochistan than inside. Whilst this may, to some extent, help raise the profile of the movement beyond the immediate confines of the province, it could also well reduce the intensity of the Balochi nationalist cause.

- **Other areas of discussion**

- *Dialogue and civil society*

It was noted that if half of the Baloch population is behind the insurgency, what are the views of the other 50%? It may be short-sighted to conclude that there was overwhelming support for the nationalist cause, or for the tribal leaders – perhaps a bigger picture is needed to assess the variety of opinions in existence in the province. Citizen's groups and local development organisations are contributing to a growth in civil society, while the appointment of the parliamentary commission for Balochistan has opened up channels of communication with the centre. However, it was recognized that the growth in civil society in Pakistan has not reached the levels of Bangladesh, for example. Although signs of dissent, both towards the authorities and the nationalists, are apparent, it is difficult to judge how widespread or influential such opposition is.

- *Demography and Sustainability*

The projected increase in population, combined with the worrying decline in the availability of water, are creating a crisis of sustainability, making environmental

issues extremely political. For example, Quetta will become uninhabitable in 15 years time due to the lack of water – the water table is falling by around 8 feet per year. The military is doing nothing to prevent this crisis, and water is being wasted at atrocious rates. It was suggested that since issues such as water supply, which are directly related to questions about dam building and ‘ownership’, are regional issues, the solutions should be sought at a regional level, with India. Shortage of basic supplies will only serve to fuel the grievances of those who already feel marginalised and under-privileged.

- *Development and Democracy*

Due to the extremely low level of development in Balochistan and the FATA, investment in education and basic infrastructure is deemed to be of primary importance. However, it is debatable whether any form of development can be successful without political inclusion. Whereas it seems very clear that the people of the tribal areas require an education before they need an MP, without representation, development is likely to be perceived as a threat, rather than as a positive change. This is particularly likely if the new infrastructure is used purely to serve the needs of the military, and development projects are not given local ‘ownership’.

• **Conclusion**

It is difficult to draw any long-term conclusions about the future of the uprisings in Balochistan and the tribal areas of Waziristan, though it is clear that these conflicts will not disappear without significant action, either in the political or military arenas.

The next two to three years, leading up to the 2007 general election, are crucial. There has been a reform agenda, but we need to wait to see if these reforms will be consolidated. The key questions are: what role will Musharraf perform after the general election and will the government’s rhetoric of political inclusion and democratic progress become a reality?