

## The Baloch Cauldron

The trouble in the Balochistan Assembly will soon be interpreted by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN) as a conspiracy to block the 2018 election, which it hopes to win. On January 2, the 65-member Balochistan Assembly — where 53 members were ministers and supporting the PMLN-led government — turned against Chief Minister Sanaullah Zehri and have brought a vote of no-confidence against him. That means a new majority will choose a new chief minister, else the assembly will be dissolved.

Suspicion will also be aroused by the action of PMLN's home minister, Sarfraz Bugti, who played his cards very close to the army deployed against Baloch rebels. He has resigned from his post and joined other PMLN members wanting to get rid of the chief minister, who was touring abroad. The complaint is typical of Balochistan: Development funds disappearing mysteriously and large areas being left out of the loop of governance. Ominously, Balochistan's veteran politician Mehmood Khan Achakzai, who represents the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PkMAP), has suggested that "the developments in Balochistan are part of a wider plot against the PMLN government and Nawaz Sharif".

The rebels against Zehri, most of them from his own party, say the main reason for their disenchantment is the non-release of development funds and lopsided development in "only two districts, including Khuzdar and Qila Abdullah". They are also upset that "there is a plan to construct 300 dams only in the Gulistan area of Qila Abdullah while other areas are being ignored". Zehri is the tribal chief of Jhalawan and was born in Khuzdar. Governor Mohammad Khan Achakzai of PkMAP was born in Qila Abdullah. Is it the old "normal" of Balochistan? Or is it rats leaving the sinking PMLN ship?

Pakistan is overwhelmingly tribal. There is a Pashtun tribal belt adjacent to Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and honour-based code of life influences the conduct of the Pashtun wherever they live in Pakistan. In Sindh in the south, the countryside is ruled by feudal lords who don't allow the writ of the state in their vast landholdings. As opposed to the individualism of the Pashtun, the Sindhi man suffers abject loss of honour under the wadero. The Baloch is a warrior who will lay down his life for his sardar, the feudal leader who rules over most of the province.

The 65-member assembly in Quetta elected in 2008 bore the infamy of naming all its members as ministers. It is alleged that they may have pocketed the province's development budget. Keeping that in mind, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif decided to plump for the "secular-nationalists" from the two parties in coalition in Quetta: The National Party and the PkMAP. Both were regarded as separatist by the conservative elements in the country — the first as secessionist from the state the second as secessionist from the province.

Just before the elections in February 2013, 113 Hazara Shia were killed and 180 injured in a bomb blast in Quetta. After the election, Baloch insurgents destroyed the resthouse in Ziarat where the founder of the nation, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, had once retired to recover from ill-health. Within the week, Quetta saw the massacre of a dozen female medical students at the Bolan Medical College. By the end of the month, another suicide attack in the Hazara Town area of the city accounted for 28 dead.

The Baloch are no doubt aggrieved over the poor economic development of their province. Their leaders had disagreed with the accession of Balochistan to Pakistan after 1947, claiming that the region had a special status under the British Raj. Over the years, Baloch nationalism seemed also to be "resource-based", as gas and minerals were discovered in the province.

More than 60 per cent of the Balochi population wanted greater autonomy for the province in 2012. But they did not demand independence. Only 37 per cent did. Those who supported greater provincial autonomy may have grasped that a separate Balochistan state, surrounded by hostile neighbours and with two conflicting Baloch-Pashtun nationalisms within, was hardly viable.

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