



Pakistan's provinces uneasy as election looms

Insurgency in Balochistan adds to unrest along the Afghan border.

BY SAMINA AHMED

The federal politics of Pakistan are driven by friction among its six main ethnic groups: the Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashtun, Baloch, Seraiki and Muhajir.

This friction sparks sporadic flare-ups and, as a result, the country is dealing with violence and upheaval in several regions. There is an armed insurgency playing out with sporadic fighting in the province of Balochistan. Tensions between the federal government and its Baloch opposition have grown recently because of Islamabad's armed response to Baloch militancy and the centre's refusal to negotiate demands for political and economic autonomy. There is also violence from militants in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas bordering Afghanistan and in the Province of Sindh.

The very problems that exist in Pakistan today are the ones that Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf pledged to eliminate when he was head of the armed forces and he ousted the elected government on October 12, 1999. Justifying his coup on the grounds of democratic reform,

including the removal of provincial grievances through the devolution of power, Musharraf pledged to "strengthen [the] federation, remove inter-provincial disharmony and restore national cohesion" in multi-ethnic, multi-regional Pakistan. He has not done so. Almost eight years later, the country is deeply divided, with the Baloch and the Sindhis, the dominant ethnic communities in Balochistan and Sindh, two of Pakistan's four provinces, rejecting the legitimacy of a Punjabi-dominated military establishment that has concentrated all power in its hands.

The province of Sindh now appears on the verge of descending into a bloody ethnic conflict similar to the one between the Sindhis and Muhajirs (Urdu-speaking refugees or migrants from India, the second largest ethnic community in Sindh) that rocked the region in the 1980s. At the same time, a low-level insurgency in Balochistan challenges the centre. There is also resentment of federal exploitation of natural resources in both Sindh and Balochistan as well as in the Pashtun-majority

Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP).

In that province, the Pakistan Supreme Court recently blocked the provincial legislature's "Taliban Law" which would have set up a department with its own police force to enforce a strict version of Islamic morality. Also, sympathy and support for Taliban fighters in Afghanistan remains high in NWFP and in the nearby Federally Administered Tribal Areas, something that Musharraf and any future president of Pakistan will have to contend with. Part of the opposition in the NWFP includes opposition to centrally devised development plans, such as the proposed large dams that would mainly benefit Punjab, Pakistan's most populous federal unit and the main recruiting ground of the politically dominant armed forces. If left unaddressed, the provincial grievances and demands for enhanced executive, legislative and fiscal autonomy could undermine national stability.



Photo: REUTERS/Ali Imam

Mohammad Akram Durrani (left), chief minister of North West Frontier Province, congratulates his Law Minister after the provincial legislature passed the controversial "Taliban Law", later struck down by the Supreme Court.

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Centralized Control and Ethnic Conflict

When Pakistan gained independence in 1947, there was overwhelming support for a parliamentary framework of governance, with embedded federal principles. Pakistan had four dominant ethno-regional groups. The majority Bengali population, 56 per cent, was based in the east wing,

separated from the west by a thousand miles of Indian territory. West Pakistan was home to the Punjabis, 56 per cent of the population there, as well as to Sindhis, Pashtuns, and Baloch. In Sindh, Muhajirs (the Urdu-speaking refugees) soon formed a majority in the province's urban centres.

Federalism under military rule

But today, more than seven years of military rule have widened the centre-periphery divide. Heading a Punjabi-dominated military regime, Musharraf has been taken to task for allegedly manipulating the Constitution and negating its federal principles. The President, the symbolic head of the federation, is now all powerful, and the national parliament has been reduced to a rubber stamp, depriving the smaller provinces of the voice they had gained in the democratic forums of the 1990s. With Musharraf wearing the dual hats of President and army chief, centralized authoritarian rule has deprived the provinces of the rights, imperfect as they were, guaranteed by the 1973 Constitution.

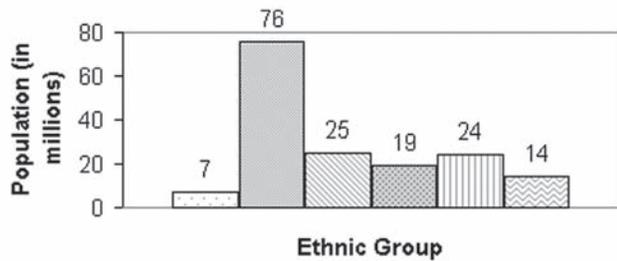
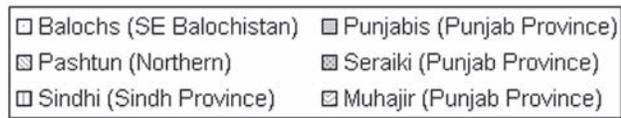
The smaller provinces had accepted the unequal distribution of power in the 1973 Constitution only as an interim measure. Because of the military's political machinations, the struggle for provincial executive, legislative, fiscal and social autonomy has become far more acrimonious. In Sindh, for instance, the Sindhi-supported Pakistan People's Party was deprived of a clear majority by the rigged national elections of 2002. Although it still emerged as the single largest party in the provincial legislature, the PPP was prevented from forming the government, with Musharraf opting instead for an alliance with the Muhajir MQM. Targeted by the security agencies and Musharraf's MQM partners, the Sindhis are displaying increasing antipathy towards the Muhajirs and the federal government.

Although ethnic tensions in Sindh have yet to turn into widespread conflict, Balochistan is another matter. While it has only six per cent of the population, Balochistan is Pakistan's largest province, with 43 per cent of the land area. The poorest in terms of human development and infrastructure, it is the richest in natural resources, providing the country with more than 40 per cent of its energy needs. The Baloch have long chafed at the centre's exploitation of their resources. The added federal refusal to accord them self-government has resulted in repeated armed struggles that subside only when the Baloch parties have access to democratic forums. Although the Baloch are no longer willing to be treated as unequal partners in the federation, theirs is not a secessionist struggle. But until the capital is willing to concede demands for political, economic and social rights, the Baloch are not likely to give up their armed resistance.

National elections are due in late 2007 and Musharraf's own presidential term also ends just before then. A free and fair election, and the presence of participatory institutions, could help to contain ethnic strife and centre-state tensions.



Ethnic Groups in Pakistan



However, having enjoyed absolute power for more than seven years with all the attendant political and economic benefits, Musharraf and his military appear disinclined to withdraw to the barracks. Musharraf justifies his intention to remain in office, retaining the dual positions of President and army chief, as a need for "unity of command" – a military concept that sits ill when it is applied to a polity, and one that has already done immense damage to a fragile federation.

Musharraf and his military would do well to learn from Pakistan's troubled history. After all, it was centralized authoritarian rule and denial of provincial rights, and the consequent ethnic discord, which led to Pakistan's disastrous dismemberment in 1971. The 1973 Constitution's federal framework might have given a new lease on life to

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South Africa considers scrapping its provinces

the ANC will use its 70 per cent majority in Parliament to amend the Constitution and enable Mbeki to run for a third term as president of South Africa remain pure conjecture. But who the next leader of the ANC will be is a separate question. The future of the provinces in South African politics may depend more on who the next president of the ANC is than on who the next president of South Africa is. Mbeki could run for a third term as ANC party president in the party elections scheduled for December 2007. He was elected unopposed as party president at the ANC's 1997 national conference and re-elected unopposed five years later. Thus far, he has not faced a challenger for president of the ANC, and he has hinted that he could stand for a third term. But, although the important Eastern Cape provincial ANC has passed a resolution supporting Mbeki's third term as party president, his most likely opponent, Jacob Zuma, has significant public support.

Part of Mbeki's legacy has been the centralization of the political system. For instance, under his leadership, the ANC has given him the power to identify potential provincial premiers. Consequently, although premiers are formally elected by their provincial legislatures, in practice they are not accountable to their provincial constituencies but to the national ruling party elite. A new leader may be less concerned about changing the provincial system but, if President Mbeki retains power after the December 2007 elections for the ruling party leadership, the centralization process that he appears to favour is likely to continue.

Thus, the battle over the future of South Africa's provinces is by no means done. Even if President Mbeki retains power he will face opposition to attempts to make significant modifications to the provincial system. First, practical questions will be asked about the ability of the national government to perform the functions that are currently the responsibility of provinces. The performance of the new South African Social Security Agency may well be critical in this debate. Second, changes to the provincial system, whether by merging provinces or abolishing provincial legislatures and changing provincial functions, will encroach on many vested interests – of both provincial politicians and bureaucrats. Third, just as provincial functions are cut and proposals are made for reducing the number of provinces or changing their functions, at least two provinces are planning to expand their fiscal grasp. Gauteng and the Western Cape – the two provinces that are performing well – are taking the initiative of extending their revenue base. Currently, less than four per cent of the revenue of provinces is “provincial own revenue” – that is, revenue raised by the province. The remainder comes from constitutionally mandated national transfers. Now the Western Cape intends to exercise its constitutional right to impose taxes for the first time by introducing a fuel levy and Gauteng is considering a surcharge on personal income tax.

Clearly, evidence that certain provinces do have some autonomy may make politicians in other provinces less willing to give up power without a modicum of resistance. ☺

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the apparently disintegrating rump of a state, but successive military interventions, culminating in the Musharraf regime, have severely strained that national consensus on power sharing. The country's stability now depends, as it did then, on Islamabad's willingness to finally devolve meaningful power to the constituent units. ☺

Pakistan's six main ethnic groups:

- Balochs: 7 million, a majority in the south and the east of Balochistan province. Language: Baluchi
- Punjabis: 76 million, most of whom live in the multi-ethnic province of Punjab, which has more than half of Pakistan's population. Language: Punjabi
- Pashtun: 25 million, a majority in the North West Frontier Province, the Federally Administrative Tribal Areas, and in the north of the province of Balochistan, and in areas across the border in Afghanistan. Language: Pushto
- Seraiki: 19 million, most live in Punjab. Language: Saraiki
- Sindhi: 24 million, most of whom live in the province of Sindh. Language: Sindhi
- Muhajir: 14 million, most of whom live in the province of Punjab. Muhajir are the Urdu-speaking people who came as refugees from India after partition in 1947. Language: Urdu

Pakistan's population was estimated at 169 million in 2006.

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Book Review

In comparison to Burgess, Hueglin and Fenna's book is not really about federalism *per se*; rather, it examines the conceptual distinctions among federal countries and considers federalism as a process. Hueglin and Fenna concentrate primarily on the concepts that underlie this process and demonstrate how they play out in critical case studies. To this end, practitioners may find Hueglin and Fenna more immediately useful than the Burgess offering.

Identical titles notwithstanding, these are very different books that stake out their own analytic ground and will appeal to different audiences. ☺