**Reconciliation with Baloch insurgents**

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Prime Minister Imran Khan, in his recent visit to Gwadar, announced that he would initiate talks with the Baloch nationalists to end the long festering insurgency which has devoured thousands of precious lives and weakened national unity impeding social and economic development in the province. This initiative should have been taken long ago in the presence of Balochistan National Movement of Sardar Akhtar Jan Mengal in the ruling coalition. The BNP would have been possibly helpful in facilitating the talks. Nevertheless, one is never late for a good deed.

However, the prime minister should keep two facts in mind. First, the unrest in Balochistan has a chronic history beginning with the annexation of Balochistan into Pakistan by force in the early 1948; its merger into the infamous One-Unit in 1954; the arbitrary dismissal of the elected government of National Awami Party in July 1972 and the tragic murder of Sardar Akbar Bugti in the mid-2000s. Through all these insurgencies, the Baloch have suffered untold miseries facing bullets, deaths, executions and jails.

Second, he would not be the first leader to initiate talks with Baloch nationalists. General Musharraf constituted a committee under Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain to look into the grievances of the Baloch. The committee’s comprehensive findings were quietly shelved. President Asif Ali Zardari initiated the ‘Protection of Balochistan Rights’ Programme enhancing the share of the province in the NFC and promising jobs in federally administered departments and institutions. However, the initiative petered out too. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif mandated the nationalist administration of Dr Abdul Malik for talks with estranged Baloch tribesmen. He failed to make any headway.

In the run up to the initiation of talks with the estranged Baloch leaders, Prime Minister Imran Khan may like to constitute a broad-based and fully mandated commission

The reasons for the failure of these abortive attempts to mainstream the insurgent Balochs are simple. Civilian and military leaders have widely differed on the question of Balochistan. Though basically a political problem, the military leadership has always approached the Baloch unrest as a security threat to the federation overruling the civilian leaders. Earlier in the 1950s, the rebel Baloch leaders laid down their weapons on General Ayub’s guarantee for reconciliation. Instead, Nawab Nauroz Khan Zehri, his sons, nephews and close aides were arrested and dumped in jail. In prison, they were unfairly tried and executed. Nawab Nauroz Khan, over 80 years, died in jail.

General Zia ul Haq refused to recall army from Balochistan when PNA leaders, in their talks with ZA Bhutto in June 1977, demanded an end to the military operation in the province. Nawab Akbar Bugti, a pro federation politician, just wanted justice for the lady doctor allegedly molested by a young army officer in Sui. There has been an ever widening trust-deficit between Baloch leaders and generals with the exception Jams, Jamalis and Magsis known for their pro-establishment stance in politics, nationalism and provincial autonomy. One can only hope that Prime Minister Imran Khan has taken his generals on board before plunging into unchartered waters.

The security forces have tried every tool in their armoury – divide and rule, pitching one militant group against the other, managing transition of power to tame leaders, stemming emergence of the real leadership, etc. All these flawed strategies and tactics have failed us in the past and would not help us in the future either in Balochistan. Our military leadership must have taken cognizance of the futility of continuous use of force against our citizens, and the fast changing regional and global situations prompting new coalitions in the regions surrounding Pakistan.

War fatigue forced the US to talk to the Afghan Taliban. We can also sit across the table with our brethren. The global strategic and economic importance of Balochistan needs no elaboration. The warm waters of the coastline of Balochistan have been historically coveted by the Imperial forces and strategic planners. The province is already in the eye of storm given the strategic significance of the CPEC and the key role of Gwadar seaport in the BR Initiative. The insurgency has remained aglow over a decade and half. We see no end to this violence in the foreseeable future too unless the federal authorities decide to take into confidence the pro-Pakistan and popular politicians from Balochistan for a political solution. Wars and insurgencies have been finally settled by political negotiations. We can draw lessons from the political settlement of past insurgencies within the South Asian region and other continents.

In the run up to the initiation of talks with the estranged Baloch leaders, Prime Minister Imran Khan may like to constitute a broad-based and fully mandated commission with adequate representation from the small provinces to look into their grievances. This will hammer home the seriousness of the federal authorities about the talks.

The commission should find out: a) the ratio of the people of smaller provinces in federal jobs in ministries, corporations, public sector enterprises in consonance with the article 38 (g) of the constitution; b) their representation at all levels in the army being a national institute as provided for in the constitutional article 39 and their appointments on merit and in open competition in the army’s industrial, commercial, financial and educational institutions; c) the number of the bogus domiciles and Permanent Residence Certificates issued from Balochistan and Sindh in the past three decades with a view to cancelling these fake documents and to initiating necessary legislation at the federal level to stop this scandalous practice; d) the due share of the small provinces in jobs and dividends of the mineral and hydrocarbon industries such as gas and oil, coal and gold, precious metal and stones exploited from Balochistan and Sind; e) the extent of the under-representation of the coastal provinces of Balochistan and Sindh in the management of the seaports and their administrations with suggestions how to compensate them; f) under representation of students of small provinces in scholarships for higher education abroad; g) representation of Balochistan and Sindh in constitutionally mandated senior appointments.

The findings of the commission may be made public for all to see.

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