



Pakistan: instability and interests in Baluchistan

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The recent clashes in Baluchistan reflect from one perspective, the age-old discontent of the local population, which is denied active participation in the processes of decision-making as regards the exploitation of resources on its territory and from the other, the programme of repression put into act by Islamabad, harming Baloch activists. The heavy investments predicted for the region, the segmentation of local Baloch political forces and the very recent extension, for an additional five years, of Pervez Musharraf's presidential mandate, don't hold out much hope for a truce in the conflict, in view of January's electoral turn.

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The new wave of violence in Baluchistan

On November 21st, the liberation army of Baluchistan (Baluchistan Liberation Army, BLA) announced the fall of its own commander, Nawabzada Balach Marri. According to Pakistani secret services, Balach Marri would have been the victim of an air raid carried out by NATO on Afghan territory; the spokesperson of the BLA, Beebrag Baloch, on the contrary, sustains that his commander would have been killed on Pakistani territory, in the district of Dera Bugti. Balach Marri, 44 years old, already a member of the provincial Assembly of Baluchistan, was accused by the Pakistani Government of being the leader of the BLA and of encouraging the revolt of a stronghold in Afghanistan. Some hypotheses over details of the place of the attack and those involved in it have been made, which will certainly have consequences over Baluchistan's stability and security plans, which are already highly precarious. Throughout the course of just one day, November 22nd, acts of uncontrollable violence and sabotage by the people of Baluchistan, were registered in the region: the principal targets were the Punjabi, the most popular ethnicity in Pakistan and members of the federal police force. Eleven victims were taken and tens of people were injured; the BLA set alight an electricity centre and several train station platforms, paralyzing the region's economic activity. The week's occurrences were joined by a fully fledged cycle of attacks, retaliations and sabotages orchestrated by the BLA. One year ago, the 79-year-old Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, leader of the JWP (Jamhoori Watan Party, one of the parties which represents the people of Baluchistan) was assassinated by the regular Pakistani forces in his hideout in the district of Kohlu. This seems to be the point from which the BLA began its campaign. On top of the spiral of violence which has been tearing the region to pieces, reside the political and economic rights of the Baloch people, until now denied, something

which frequently challenges the Pakistani Government.

An age-old question

Baluchistan is a region which has been historically divided between Afghanistan and Iran since when the Indian separation in 1947 gave life to Pakistan and the Western part of the region formed, politically part of this third state. Even if the Asiatic plug of Baluchistan seems complex in its composition, its fortune doesn't seem to be particularly connected to relations with either Teheran or Kabul, as much as it does with Islamabad. Relations between Islamabad and Quetta, Baluchistan's Pakistani capital, plummeted for the first time following the proclamation of Bangladesh, in 1971. Guerrilla warfare was then led by the historic leader Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, animated by a heated desire for autonomy and was truly triggered by events at Dhaka. Suffocated by the blood of the Pakistani army, the Baloch desires continued with the creation of local governmental mechanisms which, although failing to produce significant results for the economic and social development of the region, allowed for at least two decades of relative peace.

At the end of the 1990's, due the culmination of Pakistani political power which allowed the rise to power- through a military coup- of General Pervez Musharraf, relations with Quetta additionally deteriorated. Already leader of the Pakistani Armed Forces since 1998, the year of the country's first nuclear experiment, Musharraf gave life to a "plan for development" for Baluchistan, which set out the construction of ports, oil rigs, dams and varied investments in the military field. The Balochs, excluded from active participation in these initiatives, were opposed to their realisation. The central Government, for its part, was very interested in pursuing its own economic objectives in the region. Instead of acting through political dialogue, it launched, at the end of 2005, a vast offensive to "isolate" the dissidents of the regime. Following the various attacks carried out in the last three months, the last one on November 3rd, Pakistan declared a state of emergency, which allowed its Security Council to exercise particularly strong powers of control and government.

The shadows of the "battle against terror"

The offensive promoted two years ago by the Pakistani Government had several serious consequences over the failed human rights plan. One of the brothers of Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, Jamil Bugti, was arrested last year due to accusations of betrayal of the Army and Government; another outstanding supporter of the Baloch cause, Sardar Akhtar Jan Mengal, leader of the BNP (Baluchistan National Party) was also detained last year. He was accused of the abduction of two Federal Guards who, quoting from the version of the HRCP (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan) for their part, intended to kidnap the daughter of Mengal and in turn, were successively released. The leader of the BNP was under trail by an anti-terrorism tribunal. When Iqbal Haider, General Secretary of the HRCP, considered the offences of which Mengal had been accused, he expressed doubts over the lawfulness of an anti-terror trial and the HRCP was banished from the hearing. The data regarding the kidnapping of people is equally as alarming: in March 2007, the HRCP underwrote a petition to the Supreme Court of Pakistan, containing names ascertained of 148 disappearances, the majority of whom were Baloch. Despite the Supreme Court having put a certain amount of pressure on the Executive for the release of detainees, its President, Iftikar Mohammad

Chaudri has recently been discharged by Musharraf following the refusal to recognise the state of emergency recently declared.

Islamabad reacted to the disappearance accusation by declaring that it was related to subjects suspected of collaboration with Al-Qaeda. Following 9/11, the United States again defined the alliance with Pakistan as "important" in the "common fight against terrorism". A partnership which allows Musharraf's regime to arbitrarily order detention in a ever calmer context, without taking into account the HRCP's denouncements, which state that the majority of missing people didn't have any affiliation with religious beliefs, being Sindh and Baloch nationalists. As well as this, since the beginning of the military operations at least 84000 people have emigrated from the districts of Kohlu and Dera Bugti, some of them taking shelter in Afghanistan. Considering that the Government has prevented access both by the United Nations and humanitarian organisations, it seems now impossible to verify what has been said before.

Baluchistan's gold

One of the motivations at the basis of the conflict resides in the large quantity of resources, mainly gas, petroleum and copper, present in Baluchistan. Heavy investments into the region are often made for the exploitation of these resources, but the decision-making processes don't involve the participation of local figures. The acts of sabotage to electricity centres and gas pipelines periodically registered, are claimed by the BLA as a form of protest against central government. In December 2004, the Oil and Gas Development Corporation Ltd, the Pakistani energetic company under state control, had obtained the mandate for the exploration of the Dera Bugti district, but this was never carried through due to the conflict underway. The reserves in this area are estimated to be about 22 trillion cubed metres, with a commercial value of \$110 bn over a period of 100 years.

The port of Gwadar, constructed by the Chinese, represents then, the largest- and most controversial project- devised by the federal government in Baluchistan. The total sum of the operation is estimated to be \$1bn 13,000,000; according to experts in strategic studies, the port would serve Islamabad to largely military ends, in order to counterbalance the Indian port of Karwar. In every respect, local figures have remained excluded from this affair: the Islamabad Government has designated the Port of Singapore Authority with administration for 40 years and fiscal exemption for 20. Another of the works put into place by the Government for the development of Baluchistan is the dam of Mirani, which officially would have been created as an instrument with which to support the primary sector, but various politicians in Baluchistan believe that the real reason resides within the procurement of drinking water for the port of Gwadar, where over the course of the next ten years, a notable increase to the population is expected. Following the downpours registered in the region last summer, it has been reported that the dam has several leaks which have aggravated the already precarious the conditions of the flood victims. The opposition has asked for compensation for the damages caused by the leaks, principally due to planning errors, but although the federal minister of infrastructure Liaqat Jatoi has admitted that the dam needs to be re-planned, he has denied them any funding. Baluchistan's gas repositories assure large profits to central government, but not to the province from which they are extracted, which instead finds itself in a state of growing debt to the centre. The debt has recently decreased, not thanks to an increase in revenue put instead due to a low interest loan

granted by the Asian Development Bank. Throughout the course of this year, Musharraf announced the construction of another port in Baluchistan, in Soriani, 70km from Karachi. In May, the Pakistani Regional Assembly momentarily rejected, unanimously, its realisation.

Political paths and expectations for the next vote

Much of the compactness which characterised the Balochi political factions has by now been eroded by imposing actions carried out by central Government, aimed at increasing tensions between the various ethnicities, mainly between Balochs and Pashtun. Of the main Baloch political forces set to represent their interests in the next political elections predicted for next January, the JWP for example, doesn't seem to be the best adapted. An ex-member of the Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti party recently declared that the members of the JWP still in charge, de facto, are driven by the party of the President, the PML-Q. As a testimony to this, in October, Musharraf was confirmed as President, making use of the unconditional support of the provincial parliamentarians of the JWP.

Akhtar Mengal's BNP on the contrary potentially appears to be more representative of Baloch aspirations; for this reason, its bigwigs remain under strict observation by the secret services. On a central level, the essential prerogative for the establishment of a truce seems above all to be the free and correct development of the next electoral turn. But other means, in order to soften tones, appear binding on the part of Islamabad, particularly: the withdrawal of the army from Baluchistan, the release of political prisoners officially detained or 'disappeared', the withdrawal of accusations of terrorism against Akhtar Mengal and above all, the respect for fundamental freedom of speech and freedom of association in Baluchistan. Finally, the return of ex-premier Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif don't seem to bring to the Pakistani political scene any prospective of renovation, both having already served the country for two mandates and therefore being automatically excluded from the vote in January. Musharraf's very recent investment, after he was deprived of his uniform, as 'civil' President and the extension of his mandate for the next five years, breeds within the regime, uncertainty in one of the more unstable and geo-politically controversial areas, in the world.

Conclusion

The current situation in Baluchistan is very alarming in view of the spiralling violence which is gripping the region and which looks to divide the regular Pakistani army and the Baluchistan Liberation Army. Baluchistan, the region politically divided between Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, for its part reflects divisions of an ethnic nature which, carefully exploited by central Government, have weakened the political force of local figures.

While Islamabad continues to reinforce its own involvement in the modernisation of this very backwards region, this intention goes to show that several gaps, especially in a lacking context, can have important effects over fundamental liberties. January's vote in Pakistan, if associated with some measures of the central Government, aimed at softening tones, seems crucial to reaching a truce in the region, even if with much perplexity.

Translation by Megan Ball.