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A New Chief Minister in Balochistan: Changing Political Tide?

The Balochistan Provincial Assembly moved to elect, with a vote of 41 out of 65, Mr Abdul Quddus Bizenjo, from a minority party as the new Chief Minister of the province. This was made possible through an open revolt by Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) lawmakers in the provincial assembly and colluding with opposition parties, thus compelling the incumbent Chief Minister Sanaullah Khan Zehri to resign for fear of facing a floor test in the assembly. This paper provides an in-depth understanding into the politics of Balochistan and examines the political developments in Balochistan. Given that the PML-N is the ruling party in Islamabad, allowing its legislators in Balochistan the right to dissent is a positive development towards the restoration of democracy and functional federalism in Pakistan.

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Balochistan is Pakistan's largest province in size and smallest in terms of population, making it the most sparsely populated province of contemporary Pakistan. It is also the least developed and its politics is perhaps the most complicated. The province is of special significance to the future economic prosperity and political stability of Pakistan for a variety of reasons, including the fact that Balochistan plays a centre stage role in China's Belt and

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Road Initiative which has come under the spotlight of academics, policy-makers and global think tanks. Therefore, an understanding of the politics of Balochistan is important for any observer of Pakistani and South Asian politics.

Balochistan has long experienced separatist insurgency fuelled by ethnic nationalism against a sense of deprivation from the central government. It must be noted that not all natives of Balochistan are Baloch. According to the 1998 census, 29.6 per cent of Balochistan's population are Pakhtuns. The Pathan areas of Balochistan originate from the erstwhile Chief Commissioner's Province (CCP), prior to the creation of Pakistan. The CCP was never part of Balochistan until the abolishment of the One Unit System in 1970.

There are, thus, two different streams of ethnic nationalism in Balochistan. On one hand, there are the Baloch nationalists who are generally resentful of the federal government. They want greater autonomy and control of the province's natural resources which they feel are being exploited by Punjab. On the other hand, there are the Pakhtun nationalists, represented by the Pashtoonkhwa Milli Awami Party (PKMAP).

The Pakhtuns of Balochistan do not see themselves as Baloch people. As such, they feel that they do not belong to the province and that a Baloch identity has been imposed on them. It has been the demand of the PKMAP leader Mahmood Khan Achakzai that 12 out of 33 districts, which are Pakhtun majority districts in Balochistan, be merged into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa or their status be restored as a separate province from Balochistan.² The establishment is of the view that it is essential to keep the Pakhtuns in Balochistan so that these two nationalist movements could counterbalance each other.

The Provincial Assembly of Balochistan is a crucial institution to ensure and maintain ethnic and tribal harmony in the province. Allowing the development of politics in this constitutional body provides an outlet for ethnic strife to be managed and for power to be shared. This is highly essential to keep Balochistan in Pakistan and for federalism to function in Pakistan.

² "PkMAP for merger of 12 Baloch districts with KP", *The News*, www.thenews.com.pk/archive/print/316474-pkmap-for-merger-of-12-baloch-districts-with-kp. Accessed on 1 February 2018.

Balochistan is also home to Gawadar Port which is the terminal of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Balochistan's geostrategic location, bordering Iran, Afghanistan and Sindh (Pakistan), and providing access to the Indian Ocean/Arabian Sea, makes it a key attraction for foreign domestic investment, especially in the fields of energy, natural gas exploration mining, commodity trading and infrastructure.

The importance of Balochistan towards the future of Pakistan makes it undoubtedly one of the country's most valuable provinces. As such, analysts of South Asian geopolitics and relevant stakeholders cannot afford to ignore the recent political developments in Balochistan due to its significance on the success in development, democracy and good governance in Pakistan.

On 9 January 2018, Sanaullah Khan Zehri resigned as Chief Minister of Balochistan, after his negotiations with the rebels, both within his own party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), and in the coalition partners, failed to bear any fruits. This saved him and the party high command from the embarrassment of an imminent motion of no-confidence.

Following Zehri's resignation, Abdul Quddus Bizenjo of the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam was elected by the Balochistan Provincial Assembly with a vote of 41 out of 65 as Chief Minister and Leader of the House.³

Before one can understand the complexities involved in the ouster of Zehri and the election of Bizenjo to the office of chief minister, it is necessary to have an understanding of Balochistan's politics.

The Balochistan Provincial Assembly is a 65-member house based on the Westminster parliamentary system, with 51 members who are directly elected by their constituency. The other 14 members are nominated to reserved seats comprising 11 seats for women and another three seats strictly for non-Muslims. The reserved seats are proportionally allocated to the political parties by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) based on the number of elected seats won during the elections. The political parties then submit their list of nominees

³ "PML-Q's Mir Abdul Quddus Bizenjo sworn in as Balochistan CM", *The Express Tribune*, www.tribune.com.pk/story/1607696/1-pml-qs-mir-abdul-quddus-bizenjo-elected-as-balochistan-cm/. Accessed on 1 February 2018.

for the reserved seats to the ECP. The constitution of Pakistan guarantees women and non-Muslim representation in its senate, national assembly and provincial assemblies.

The current political composition of the Balochistan Provincial Assembly is represented by the table below.⁴

Table 1: Balochistan Provincial Assembly Seats by Party

Party	Seats
Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz	21
Pashtoonkhwa Milli Awami Party	14
National Party	11
Jamiat Ulema-e Islam-Fazal-ur-Rehman	8
Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam	5
Balochistan National Party-Mengal	2
Balochistan National Party-Awami	1
Majlis Wahdatul Muslimeen	1
Awami National Party	1
Independent	1
Total	65

Source: Provincial Assembly of Balochistan, www.pabalochistan.gov.pk/index.php/members/party_pos/en/27.

As shown in Table 1, the Balochistan Provincial Assembly is a hung parliament, with the PML-N as the single largest party in the house.

In Balochistan, tribal affiliations play a large role in shaping the polity of the province to the extent of determining loyalties, hostilities and alliances. It has been observed in Balochistan politics that the candidates are often elected based on their tribal-social standing rather than on partisan grounds. This explains why tribal chieftains known as Nawabs or Sardars in Balochistan are commonly elected to the provincial assembly and are always represented in the provincial cabinet. It also provides the rationale of blurring party lines and the inability of the central leadership of the political parties across the board to impose party discipline and control their members of the provincial assembly (MPA) once elected.

⁴ “Members Directory by Party”, Provincial Assembly of Balochistan, www.pabalochistan.gov.pk/index.php/members/party_pos/en/27. Accessed on 1 February 2018.

After the May 2013 Balochistan Provincial Assembly election, the top three parties that emerged – PML-N, PKMAP and the National Party (NP) – came together to sign a power-sharing deal known as the Murree Agreement. Under this accord, the chief minister's office was to be shared by the PML-N and the NP across the term of the national assembly with each party occupying the position for two and a half years.

The agreement was effectively carried out with Abdul Malik Baloch of the NP serving as chief minister from 7 June 2013 to 23 December 2015 and then resigning to allow Zehri to take over from 24 December 2015 until the end of provincial assembly's term, if not for the movement against him.

Separately, Muhammad Khan Achakzai, Mahmood Khan's elder brother, was nominated as the Governor of Balochistan. This arrangement allowed the PML-N to exercise its numerical strength in the Balochistan Provincial Assembly while securing the support from both the Pakhtun and Baloch nationalists.

The rebellion against Zehri did not happen overnight – it was a brewing pot that was left to boil. Since he assumed office, there had been growing grievances over his interference in the affairs of the ministries of his cabinet members.

There have also been allegations by dissidents of his restrictive and selective allocation of Constituency Development Funds (CDFs), in particular, against MPAs holding tribal positions. The CDFs are allocated to individual electoral constituencies both at the national assembly and provincial assembly levels. They are supposed to be used by the assembly members for local projects, upgrading, and maintenance works. However, the CDFs have often been a source of corruption and subject of political contention in Pakistan due to the way in which they have been misused by successive governments.

According to the procedures of the Balochistan Provincial Assembly, in order to move a no-confidence motion, it must be supported by 20 per cent of the MPAs. In this case, the required number would be 13 out of 65 MPAs. The no-confidence motion that was submitted against Zehri had the support of 14 MPAs, all belonging to the opposition parties. However, it was not moved as Zehri resigned.

The table below shows the votes casted by the Balochistan Provincial Assembly for Bizenjo as chief minister.⁵

Table 2: Votes casted for Bizenjo by Party

Party	Seats
Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz	19
Pashtoonkhwa Milli Awami Party	1
National Party	3
Jamiat Ulema-e Islam-Fazal-ur-Rehman	8
Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam	5
Balochistan National Party-Mengal	2
Balochistan National Party-Awami	1
Majlis Wahdatul Muslimeen	1
Awami National Party	1
Total	41

Source: DAWN.COM, www.dawn.com/news/1382775.

If one compares Tables 1 and 2, it is evident that the major parties in the provincial assembly have been unable to enforce the party whip on their members, thus reflecting that the election of Bizenjo was clearly an act of rebellion.

All members of the PML-N, except for Zehri and the assembly speaker Rahilla Durrani, voted for Bizenjo.

The PKMAP, being the second largest party in the house, known as a staunch ally of the PML-N in Balochistan, felt that, since the PML-N and the NP had already occupied the chief minister's office, it now had a fair chance to get its turn. The PKMAP, thus, fielded its own candidate, Agha Syed Liaqat Ali, against Bizenjo, thereby providing an alternative option for the MPAs to choose. Ali managed to get all the votes from his party MPAs, with the exception of Manzoor Khan Kakar who voted for Bizenjo. While the PKMAP has initiated disciplinary proceedings and legal action against Kakar, he has been rewarded by Bizenjo with the post of provincial revenue minister in the Balochistan cabinet.

⁵ "Bizenjo becomes Balochistan CM for five months." DAWN.COM, www.dawn.com/news/1382775. Accessed on 1 February 2018.

The NP's position was to abstain from the vote. Yet, it also had to face its share of dissent from three of its MPAs who voted for Bizenjo. They included Khalid Langove whose residence was recently declared as a sub-jail due to his involvement in a huge corruption case.⁶ In his speech explaining his vote for Bizenjo, Langove said that, "Indeed, I have betrayed my party and I am embarrassed in front of my party, but this gentleman (Bizenjo) has been loyal to me and supportive of me since my arrest...There is absolutely no pressure on me...I had been left alone by former CM Sanaullah Zehri when I needed him the most."⁷ NP MPAs, Mujeebur Rehman Hassani and Fateh Buleti, also voted for Bizenjo.⁸

In total, 11 MPAs abstained from the vote – two MPAs from PML-N, eight from the NP and one independent MPA.

The political developments that have taken place in Balochistan appear to be an unusual event even by Pakistan standards as it is very rare that the largest party in the assembly would support the opposition to overthrow its own chief minister and then elect another chief minister from a significantly smaller party in the assembly.

The revolt of the PML-N MPAs shows that the party president, Nawaz Sharif, has limited influence in the internal politics of the PML-N Balochistan chapter. It has also been reported by *Dawn News* that, during an advisory meeting on Balochistan, Sharif has been quoted saying, "It is beyond perception as to why a member of a minority party who secured just a few hundred votes was made the chief minister". Furthermore, Sharif has also termed the appointment of Bizenjo as "a joke with democracy" and vowed to unearth the motives behind the "conspiracy".⁹

During the days in between Zehri's resignation and Bizenjo's election, many Pakistani analysts on opinion-editorial pages of newspapers and on talk shows raised the possibility of the political crisis as a conspiracy to dissolve the Balochistan Provincial Assembly in order to delay the Pakistani senate election scheduled for March 2018. The logic around this is that,

⁶ "NAB to challenge sub-Jail status for Langove's home", *DAWN*, www.dawn.com/news/1370348. Accessed on 1 February 2018.

⁷ "Speech in Balochistan Assembly." YouTube, *YouTube*, 13 January 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=HzAC6vKdXU8. Accessed on 1 February 2018.

⁸ "PkMAP for merger of 12 Baloch districts with KP", op. cit.

⁹ "Sharif vows to unearth Balochistan 'conspiracy'." *DAWN*, www.dawn.com/news/1383305/sharif-vows-to-unearth-balochistan-conspiracy. Accessed on 1 February 2018.

as Balochistan is a hung assembly, Balochistan MPAs would not be able to reach a consensus to elect a replacement for Zehri. The Governor of Balochistan would then have to advise the President of Pakistan to dissolve the Balochistan Provincial Assembly. If the assembly is dissolved, there is a likelihood that the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Provincial Assembly would decide to do likewise, so that the senate elections could be held after the Pakistan general elections. There were other conspiracy theories that had emerged, alleging that “the establishment” was behind this so as to topple the PML-N government in the province.

The fashion in which Bizenjo was elected and the fact that the Balochistan Provincial Assembly was spared from dissolution have put to rest all conspiracy theories.

The right to dissent by consent is a key element of democracy. The actions of the Balochistan MPAs display the ability to act independently of their respective party high commands and of the federal government. It can also be observed that there has been no use of any extra-constitutional mechanism or undemocratic forces involved in Zehri’s overthrow. In the words of Balochistan Home Minister, Mir Sarfaraz Bugti, “[The] no-confidence motion moved against Chief Minister Balochistan Sanaullah Zehri is our democratic, constitutional and political right in the Balochistan Assembly, as majority of Balochistan Assembly members are with us...is part of democratic process, we are political people and believe in political revival.”¹⁰

If Governor Raj was imposed in Balochistan which could have been possible since the PML-N was in power in Islamabad, it would have created another negative precedence of coercive federalism in Pakistan which would also have caused much resentment in the province. It is also a positive development towards democracy in Pakistan that the national assembly and provincial assemblies are set to complete their constitutional terms. This would have been a very difficult achievement just over a decade ago.

The overthrow of Zehri will be a case study of rebellion against central party leadership. This will also be a lesson for the need of internal party democracy and for leaders of political

¹⁰ “No-Confidence motion is our democratic right”, *The Frontier Post*, www.thefrontierpost.com/no-confidence-motion-democratic-right/. Accessed on 1 February 2018.

parties to take notice and address the grievances of party members and legislators before they are compelled to react in the same drastic manner as seen in Balochistan.

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