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Islamabad Dressing Balochistan's Wounds

Federation Easing Finances: The newly elected Federal Government seems to be quite focused on Balochistan in terms of its political, social and structural development. Right after easing Islamabad's relations with Baloch political and insurgency leaders, Zardari-Gilani led PPP Federal Government is all set to take further steps to reach further into the hearts and minds of the Baloch leadership and people alike. As the first step, on the request of the Federal Government, the State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) has decided to convert the overdraft (OD) of Balochistan into a soft long term loan. There is an OD of Rs. 18 billion against Balochistan and despite all his claims, this issue was not considered during the nine years of Musharraf-rule. The provincial government repeatedly requested the SBP for converting the OD into a soft long term loan but due to lack of political will and consolidated leadership in Islamabad, the SBP couldn't be convinced. On the special instructions of PM Gilani, the SBP Governor, Shamshad Akhtar, visited Balochistan and met with government officials to discuss the ongoing financial situation of the province. During the visit, she agreed to convert the OD into a soft long term loan and instructed the relevant SBP representatives in Quetta to work closely with the provincial government to prepare the necessary proposal for the purpose. With all the paper work reportedly done, the Board of Governors of SBP is expected to meet before October 20 where the proposal is expected to be formally approved. With this conversion, the province will save nearly 700 million rupees in the first year and with a good performance to pay back the money to the SBP during the first year, rest of the loan would be made interest free and the province would be given amnesty on the interest of nearly 2.5 billion rupees. The provincial government is focused to paying back the OD amount within six years. Many observers believe that the new Balochistan government, under the

“Balochistan suffered excesses during the past 60 years. We condemn it. We also strongly condemn the killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti. We also condemn injustices committed with the Pashtoon and Baloch people,” Punjab CM said in mid July.

Chief Minister-ship of Nawab Muhammad Aslam Raisaani, would be able to trim its nonproductive expenditures and a new formula with the Federation is also expected to be worked out on the issue of royalties against the Federation's exploration of natural resources and

minerals from Balochistan.

The Chief Ministers' Solidarity: On the other hand, all the four Chief Ministers are working together to reach a positive agreement on the National Finance Commission Award (NFCA). The largest Pakistani province, Punjab, has reportedly given positive signals to Balochistan while other two provinces, North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) and Sindh are also sympathetic to the concerns of Balochistan. If all the provinces agree on a joint NFCA, this will be considered a

great political success of all the Provincial and the Federal Governments. Despite having an image of a very strong military ruler, President General Musharraf, couldn't get an agreement among the four provinces on the NFCA and this purpose was thus served via a presidential order that was received in a bad political taste.

Punjab and Federation Reaching Out: Governments in all the provinces and Islamabad are seriously concerned about the deteriorating socio-economic and political situation in Balochistan and as a gesture of solidarity, Punjab Chief Minister, Mian Shahbaz Sharif visited Balochistan in mid July and announced many steps from the financial aid, supply of additional wheat to increasing the scholarships for Baloch students in the higher education institutions in Punjab. “Balochistan suffered excesses during the past 60 years. We condemn it. We also strongly condemn the killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti. We also condemn injustices committed with the Pashtoon and Baloch people,” he said. Sharif also proposed of forming a Chief Ministers Coordination Committee and ambitiously suggested that it should meet once a month. The committee has at least met once and the Federal Government appreciated the moot and welcomed it as a sign of provincial harmony and political solidarity.

During the final press conference, Mian Shahbaz Sharif agreed with Balochistan's Chief Minister that provinces must be given more powers and autonomy as originally envisaged in the 1973 constitution. Also at the occasion, Shahba Sharif said that the distribution of resources under NFCA was on the basis of population but “backwardness, area, deprivation etc should also be taken into account.” He added to the full agreement from his Baloch counterpart that the 1973 constitution was finalized with consensus and envisaged that the Federating Units get equal opportunities. “For this, we have to wage a joint struggle (and) people, bureaucracy and politicians must work

together to live up to the expectations of the nations,” Raisaani said in agreement.

Insurgents’ Next Steps: The grandson of the killed Nawab Akbar Bugti, Barhamdagh Bugti, reportedly in exile in Afghanistan, vowed on the first national convention of the Balochistan Republican Party that Balochistan had no future if it decides to stay with Pakistan. “We have seen much of the parliamentary politics and it has not worked. We would continue our resistance to claim our rights,” he said in a telephonic address to reportedly few of his followers. Baloch observers believe that Islamabad, by reaching out to other militant groups i.e., Balochistan Republican Army, Balochistan Liberation Army and Balochistan Liberation Front, the Balochistan Republican Party has been isolated from the mainstream of Baloch insurgency. Rest of the three insurgency groups announced an indefinite ceasefire in early September which is still intact. Under President Zardari’s instructions, who himself is an ethnic Baloch, nearly all cases against the mainstream Baloch resistance politicians have been annulled and the Interior Minister, Rahman Malik has been able to achieve some political ground with Akbar Bugti’s son, Nawab Talal Bugti.

If the Federal Government succeeds in addressing the issues facing Balochistan as promised with both the people and the government of Balochistan, the political and public future of the resistance leaders like Barahamdagh Bugti would not be much promising. Islamabad and Punjab seem to be sincerely committed in their bid to reach out to Balochistan and the coming few months will decide the future political course between Balochistan and the rest of the country.