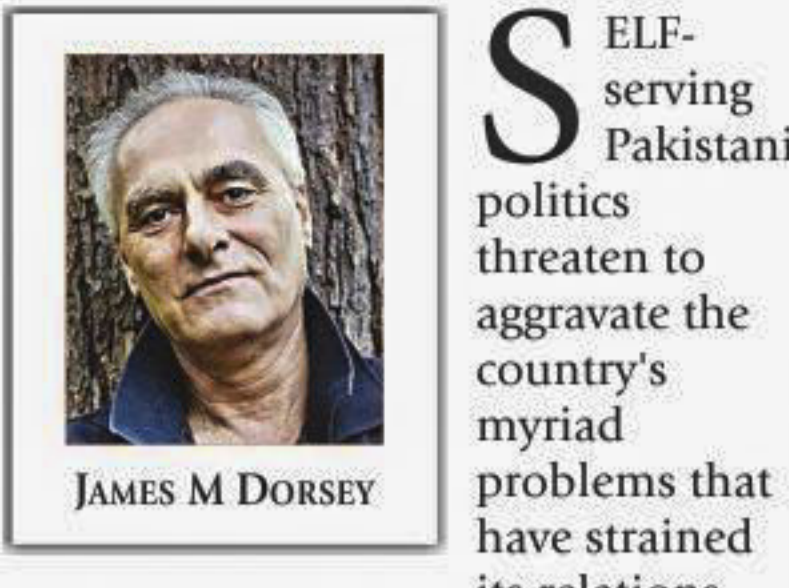


Pakistan's internal politics may worsen problems



SELF-serving Pakistani politics threaten to aggravate the country's myriad problems that have strained its relations

with the United States and could heighten tension in the restless, key geo-strategic region of Balochistan, a vital node bordering Iran in China's Belt and Road initiative and the earmarked home for the People's Republic's second foreign military base.

Pakistan's short-sighted political battles are being fought at a time of worsening relations with the United States over alleged Pakistani support of militants and concern that the US may withdraw from the 2015 international nuclear agreement with Iran. They potentially create a dilemma for China which is heavily invested in Pakistan with its more than USD 50 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Keen to prevent ousted former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) from winning a majority in elections scheduled for July, the Pakistani military, in the latest incident, appears to be backing efforts to force Nawab Sanaullah Zehri, the PML-N Chief Minister of Balochistan, to resign.

The stage to remove Zehri was set last week when the province's interior minister, Sarfaraz Bugti, known for his close ties to the armed forces, stepped down after co-sponsoring a motion of no-confidence in the chief minister in the provincial assembly.

The targeting of Zehri signalled the closing of the door on already failed efforts to drive a wedge between various nationalist Baloch insurgent groups and weaken Islamic militants that have wreaked havoc in



A Pakistani paramilitary soldier standing guard near the Beijing-funded 'megaport' of Gwadar in Balochistan, Pakistan.

Balochistan with attacks on Chinese, Pakistani military, and Shiite targets.

Closing the door amounted to kicking a dead body. Informal contacts between the Baloch provincial government, the federal government when Sharif was still in office, and Brahmdagh Bugti, a Baloch nationalist living in exile in Switzerland, who heads the Baloch Republican Party, fizzled out when Zehri came to office in late 2015. Nonetheless, Zehri refrained from slamming the door shut.

By the same token, Bugti's demand that Pakistan end its military and paramilitary operations against nationalist forces in Balochistan, a resource-rich, population-poor region the size of France that straddles the border with the Iranian province of Sistan and Baluchistan, as a pre-condition for formal talks was likely one reason that the contacts failed.

More militant nationalists refused to endorse Bugti's position, but

quietly watched whether he would make headway. Even so, there was no guarantee that the militants would have accepted a deal negotiated by Bugti, whose grandfather, Nawab Bugti, was killed by the military in 2006, a year after he had presented a plan for greater Baloch autonomy that stopped short of demanding independence.

The timing of the effort to topple Zehri and foreclose renewed contacts with Baloch nationalist factions could not be more sensitive. It comes against the backdrop of a long history of military support for militant religious groups to counter the nationalists in Balochistan, and at a moment that the armed forces have used militants elsewhere to weaken the PMN-L while at the same time refuting US allegations that it backs extremists in Pakistan as well as Afghanistan.

The Trump administration said last week that it was cutting almost

all security aid to Pakistan believed to total more than USD 1 billion until it deals with militant networks operating on its soil. Pakistan, in response and in advance of a visit this month by a United Nations Security Council team to evaluate Pakistani compliance with its resolutions, has sought to crack down on the fundraising and political activities of Hafez Saeed, an internationally designated terrorist accused of having masterminded the 2008 attacks in Mumbai.

The crackdown constitutes a double-edged sword. Pakistan and its military need to be seen to be acting against internationally designated terrorist groups, yet Saeed has been treated over the years with kid gloves. His organisation was allowed to continue operations under multiple guises and although he was put under house arrest several times, he was not remanded behind bars. It wasn't clear whether the crackdown by the PMN-

L-led federal government of Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi has the backing of the military.

Saeed has recently attempted to move into mainstream politics with the backing of the military. Military support was "a combination of keeping control over important national matters like security, defence and foreign policy, but also giving these former militant groups that have served the state a route into the mainstream where their energies can be utilised," a senior military official said. Saeed, who headed Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), widely viewed as one of South Asia's most violent groups, was a military proxy in confronting India in Kashmir.

Associates of Saeed said that their participation in this summer's election was in part designed to prevent the PMN-L from returning to office. "There is little else more patriotic than ensuring the ouster of the Sharifs. Pakistan needs a government that serves Pakistani, not Indian, interests," said Nadeem Awan, a spokesman for Jamat u-Dawa, widely seen as a LeT front headed by Saeed.

Former Pakistani strongman General Pervez Musharraf said last month that he was discussing an alliance with Milli Muslim League (MML), the political party Saeed is trying to register. Speaking on Pakistani television, Musharraf pronounced himself "the greatest supporter of LeT."

The military, also last month, displayed its political influence and inclination by mediating an end to a weeks-long blockade of a main artery leading into Islamabad to protest a perceived softening of the government's adherence to Islam in a proposed piece of legislation.

The resolution was seen as favouring Tehreek Labbaik Pakistan (TLP), the organiser of the protest. TPL is a political front for Tehreek Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLR), which

glorifies Mumtaz Qadri, who was executed for killing Punjab governor Salman Taseer because of his opposition to Pakistan's draconic blasphemy law.

All in all, the Pakistani military appears to be embroiled in battles on multiple fronts in a Herculean effort to satisfy target audiences with contradictory demands. Countering the PML-N by supporting religious forces complicates refuting US allegations of support for militants.

It also risks escalating violence in Balochistan and enhancing opportunity for external players like the United States and Saudi Arabia to use the province as a launching pad for efforts to destabilise Iran should they opt to travel down that road.

President Donald J Trump has to decide this month whether to certify Iranian compliance with the nuclear agreement and waive US sanctions. A failure to do so could lead to a US withdrawal from the agreement.

China, by the same token, sees Pakistan's use of proxies against India as useful, yet needs stability in Balochistan to secure its massive investment.

Pakistan could well be the ultimate loser in battles between its various institutions that appear focused more on vested interests than on resolving issues that have long held the country back such as extremism, intolerance, and ensuring fundamental rights. In pursuit of their own interests, neither the United States nor China appear willing to help their Pakistani allies look beyond their narrow and most immediate concerns towards the development of policies that would launch the country on a path of security, stability and economic prosperity.

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The uncertain fate of Rohingya women



AMINA Khatun, a 40-year-old Rohingya woman, was sitting in front of the door of her tiny shelter house with her two-year-old son Salam. She somehow managed to flee Myanmar along with her son but her

husband Abdul Rashid was not so lucky. He was killed by the Myanmar army.

She reached the shores of the Naf river safely. However, she is now passing her days in the camps in Bangladesh in utter oblivion, not knowing what lies ahead. There are other female-headed households in the camps going through the same thing—struggling alone with mouths to feed isn't the only problem. Rohingya women are facing amidst one of the worst ongoing humanitarian crises in the world.

During my visit this month to Rohingya makeshift settlements in Cox's Bazar, currently sheltering more than 800,000 forcefully displaced Myanmar nationals who have fled the brutality of the Myanmar army in Rakhine State, I found that Rohingya women are especially vulnerable to many forms of transgressions exclusively based on their gender. Among the newly arrived 655,000 Rohingyas, 60 percent are women. It is easy to understand the threats any crisis situation poses to women. Structural inequalities put these Rohingya women—who have just escaped unspeakable horror in their native country—in a more vulnerable position to all forms of violence.

As I was passing through the narrow aisles of Kutupalong makeshift settlement, the largest of the camps sheltering Rohingyas, I gazed upon women and girls of different ages whose distress was palpable through the look of despair in their eyes. Like Amina, her neighbour Shahida is also running her three-member household alone after her husband

left her to marry some other woman after coming to Bangladesh. Following their traditional norms, Amina and Shahida do not go outside of their huts, which is why they solely depend on the relief items for subsistence. It has been more than a month since they last received relief assistance. They have no rice or lentils left to cook. When I asked Amina how she is feeding her son and herself, she said she occasionally gets food from her neighbours and sometimes they go hungry.

There are thousands of female-headed households in these camps who have lost the breadwinner of the family—typically a male. Along with countless other challenges that come with being alone, these women who have never stepped outside of their home to earn livelihoods are finding it difficult to provide for themselves and their children.

She said she felt relieved but not happy. She said the ration they are getting is not nearly enough although her ten-year-old nephew occasionally works and brings in some money.

I also found some pretty faces glimmering with hope—in their smile and eye-catching attire. Rashida, a teenage girl of 17 who lives with her mother, sister-in-law and three nieces and nephew, was one of them. Her elder brother is still in Myanmar trying to escape the brutal ethnic cleansing. When I went to their home, on the first day peeking through the curtain I found a man sitting in the hut who,



A Rohingya woman and child stand in the Naybara refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, December 3, 2017.

Rashida said, was not her family member. She was not interested to talk to me that day. It made me curious so I went to meet her again the next day. She was all dolled up just like the day before and was standing in front of her hut. After getting to know her and the things she had gone through, I asked her how she was doing now—whether or not she was happy with her life since she looked much more joyful thanks to her makeup and colourful attire.

She said she felt relieved but not happy. She said the ration they are getting is not nearly enough although her ten-year-old nephew occasionally works and brings in some money. When I asked her about her plans to get married, she blushed and said some men from the Rohingya community want to marry her but she wishes to marry a Bangladeshi man. She doesn't want to go back to Myanmar and wants to settle down here. The man who was sitting with her the other day was one of her many suitors, she said, denying any other

prospect when I probed her. After bidding her farewell I went to one of her neighbours' hut who informed me that many Rohingya men frequent Rashida's place. At first Rashida would come to her place whenever someone approached their hut and wasn't willing to meet them but now she stays there. The woman, like many other parents, raised her concern about these "unusual incidents" as she has a daughter of almost marriageable age. She does not want a future like this for her daughter. Other parents are also concerned about the safety of their girls and are trying to marry off their daughters at a very early age considering it as their greatest chance of security and survival. These concerns are leading to an increase in child marriage in the camps which was already prevailing in the Rohingya community, as the anecdotal evidence suggests.

Other forms of sexual violence like street harassment are also prevalent in these camps. Young girls do not go far from their huts as

they are harassed by men and boys in their own community. They cannot even seek help as it defames the girl in the community. Young girls and boys are vulnerable to human trafficking as well. Domestic violence has been normalised to the point where Rohingya women are expressing relief for being beaten up by their husbands rather than being raped by the Myanmar army. These women whose rights have been trampled upon in their own country are now living in an environment where physical and sexual violence is pervasive.

Old Rohingya women are at high risk of economic deprivation. Eighty-year-old Rabeya Khatun is now living with her son and daughter-in-law who have four mouths to feed along with her. Back in Myanmar she used to help them with the cattle and also had her deceased husband's property to support them. Here she is completely dependent on her son. The old woman does not even know what would be better for her—to go back to her own country or to live here in utmost insecurity. But she is certain that they are neither getting back the property they have lost nor can they go back to Myanmar to die.

After living through the extreme trauma of losing their home and loved ones and being physically and sexually abused, these women and girls came here seeking shelter; yet they are going through sexual exploitation, "survival sex" for protection and money, domestic violence, economic adversity, stress and anxiety. For me, a member of the host community where these people have come to seek refuge, it is something worth thinking about. Like these Rohingya women, we too have no idea about what lies ahead in the future for them but we all have a collective and individual responsibility to act upon to make their lives a little easier and make them feel safer.

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A WORD A DAY

[C] YNSURE
NOUN

A person or thing that is the centre of attention or admiration.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	30 Lamp spot	8 Studied (over)
1 Openhanded hit	32 On deck	10 Owed amounts
5 Pile	34 Bro's sibling	11 Traveled by horse
9 Like some jackets	35 Parcel out	16 Stuck
11 Stallone role	36 In - (disordered)	18 Meal starter
12 Chosen few	38 Bearings	21 Pharaoh symbols
13 Studio sign	39 Barista's creation	23 Bridge do-over
14 Poorly lit	40 Chef's collection	24 "Gangsta's Paradise" rapper
15 You don't want to get on somebody's	41 Fling	25 Online program
17 Resort site	DOWN	27 Meet, as a challenge
19 Went ahead	1 Goes downhill	28 Lyric poets
20 Sleepy mammal	2 Easter flowers	29 Mailing need
21 Dray puller	3 Zoo resident	30 Particles
22 Manual readers	4 Parrot or puppy	31 Road curves
24 Beanie or beret	5 Painter Holbein	33 Some babies
26 Copy for pasteup	6 Contacts, in a way	37 Small rug
29 Soak up	7 Tolerates	

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER

WHAT ARE YOU DOING, BEETLE?
I'M COUNTING ALL THE ROCKS IN THE ROAD.
321, 322, 323, 324...

DON'T YOU HAVE ANYTHING MORE IMPORTANT TO DO?
YEAH, THAT'S WHY I'M DOING THIS.
325, 326, 327, 328...

BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

HAMMIE ACTING LIKE A DOG IS DRIVING ME CRAZY.
I KNOW.
DON'T WORRY, IT'S JUST A PHASE THAT WILL GET THROUGH.

WHY ARE THERE NEWSPAPERS ALL OVER YOUR FLOOR?
PRECAUTION. I'M COMPLETELY HOUSEBROKEN.
OR NOT.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

P	A	R	L	O	R	E	M	I	T	
I	G	U	A	N	A	D	A	N	E	
C	E	N	T	E	R	P	I	E	C	E
I	N	E	R	T						
H	I	N	D	I	O	T	A			
D	O	D	O	S	E	R	I	F	S	
O	R	E	P	A	D	L	O	U		
G	N	A	W	E	D	O	D	O	R	
S	L	I	D	L	E	G	N	A	T	
S	A	B	R	E						
M	I	D	D	L	E	E	A	R	T	
A	R	N	O	T	E	E	A	R	I	
T	E	A	M	A	N	T	O	N	Y	