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PAKISTAN: A DEFINING MOMENT?

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The Indian subcontinent is the focus of much international attention at present. While India goes to the polls in a massive polling effort spread over several weeks, Pakistan is confronting what maybe the worse crisis since the state was created 62 years ago. Recent developments in Pakistan's northern Swat valley district may be key for the future of the region, and of the world's stability as a whole. The worrying question is today: is Pakistan on the brink of a defining moment in its history, or will it once more re-emerge, phoenix-like, from the present political, economic and social crisis, as it has done countless times before?

A growing number of commentators both in and outside the country are converging around the view that this time round, it is truly on the edge of a slippery slope into chaos.

For most of them, the solution is to give greater power to the people. Others take the view that things will normalise once the US forces are out of Afghanistan – a bone of strong contention for Pakistanis, who have little affection for US international policy towards the Muslim world, and see the Afghanistan conflict as not being “their” war, albeit partly being fought on Pakistan's soil – things will calm down. But is there time to wait for this to happen?

Unquestionably, Pakistan has repeatedly shown a resilience that has amazed many, by the perennial predictions of its im-

minent failure of a state. In the space of 18 months, it has successfully (and almost inexplicably) survived a recent history that includes an economic crash, the assassination of its best-known political leader, Benazir Bhutto, a secessionist insurgency and a wave of religious militant violence, without disintegrating. However, now, a number of seasoned observ-

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ers of the Pakistani political scene both inside and outside the country, are deeply concerned about Pakistan's future.

Certainly the news emerging almost daily of new inroads by the Pakistan Taliban in consolidating their grip on parts of the country, including in urban areas and the apparent government inaction in blocking the expansion of their influence, does not inspire optimism.

Is Pakistan facing a situation like that of pre-revolutionary Iran? And if so, can anything be done to prevent it, and by whom? To determine whether Pakistan will indeed slide into revolution and chaos, along the lines of the clerical revolution in Iran at the end of the Shah's reign, it is necessary to look at some of the variables involved. These include failures of governance, a lack of pro-poor change that give the masses a meaningful stake in their future; the impact of increasing violence on society; interpretations of Islam, and the resultant “clash” of civilisations.

Failures of Governance

First, Pakistan has suffered an abject failure of the state via a succession of governments, to deliver to ordinary people on any of the critical elements that allow for peace and stability. This vacuum has been seized upon by the Tehrik-i-Nifaz-i-Shariat-i-Mohammadi (TNSM) or Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Law,¹ in Swat, to its advantage.

In the face of economic and political melt-down, the state appears to acquiesce to, or to have been cowed into submission by the enemy at its gates. This has been demonstrated time and again. Currently, the government appears to regard the compromise in Swat as a “peace deal” even though the TNSM has clearly stated that they will only provide peace if their version of Shari’a is implemented. The question is, will they stop at Swat or pursue their broad strategic goals in the rest of Pakistan once Swat is secured?

“The district of Buner Valley, only 100 kilometers from Islamabad, has just seen the implementation of Shari’a”

Stopping the TNSM seems unlikely, judging by recent events, including the unopposed expansion of an armed Taliban presence into Buner district, in Malakand division, which has just seen the implementation of Shari’a law under the recent peace deal with the TNSM, which is adjacent to Swat, and only 100 kilometers from the capital, Islamabad, on April 21 2009. Taliban militants operating in Pakistan’s Swat region who agreed a peace deal with the government have expanded operations into Buner, taking over mosques and government offices. The administrative head of the area is missing, believed kidnapped. Buner is located close to a key hydroelectric dam and to the roads that link Pakistan to China, and Islamabad to Peshawar, the capital of the North West Frontier Province, much of which is already under Taliban sway. Many U.S. officials - but also Pakistani experts - expect the militants to continue advancing. The Taliban “have now become a self-sustaining force,” author Ahmed Rashid told a recent Washington conference. “They have an agenda for Pakistan, and that agenda is no less than to topple the government of Pakistan and ‘Talibanizing’ the entire country.”²

Missed Opportunity?

Earlier, during the siege of the Red Mosque in Islamabad in 2007, many in Islamabad argued that if only President Musharraf had stood up to the “bullies in the playground” at the very start, the situation could have been contained, civil liberties

protected, and the rule of law seen to be enforced. In the event, as all those who have seen playground bullies know, the perpetrators simply became more and more daring, having received a clear signal from the administration that it was vacillating, and split between those who favoured action and those considering that the involvement of the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) Agency meant that involvement was off-limits – even to the army. The situation was of course complicated – like much else in Pakistan’s complex politics – by the fact that the army was divided in its support for the ISI.

The ISI, once heavily backed by Washington, masterminded the *mujahideen* resistance in Afghanistan to the Soviet invasion in the 1980s, training and financing the insurgents. The ISI then decided to use the same tactics against India, founding a series of militant groups that started a violent resistance to Indian rule in the disputed region of Kashmir. The agency also nurtured a number of sectarian movements, such as Sipah-e-Sahaba. Then, in the mid-1990s, the ISI helped create a new Islamic movement

in Afghanistan, the Taliban, which rapidly managed to take over the country. It also spawned a copycat Pakistani Taliban movement. The problem that has been inher-

ited here is that many of these militant groups, which were used to further Pakistan’s foreign policy and domestic aims, have slipped out of the ISI’s control, and under the influence of Al Qaida have turned on the state itself, as outlined below.

Undisputably, the people of Pakistan are for the most part genuinely observant Muslims. However, it can by no means be inferred that for the most part they are complicit in acquiescing to the type of social and religious changes being introduced in Swat. One exception however is that of the urban lower-middle classes, who are reported to display a sense that maybe a different type of regime, more strongly rooted in Islamic precepts, may be more likely to deliver a slice of the (economic) pie to them, than the previous feudal-military alliances. This was the thinking behind the massive swing to the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) party across the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), - one of the two poorest provinces in the country, where unemployment is reportedly around 43% - in the first elections held under Musharraf, where feudal candidates were trounced because the masses were fed up of their broken promises. However, in the second election held in February 2008, the MMA got nowhere, having also failed to make any meaningful inroads into poverty).

Prescriptions for Change

Despite a number of years of strong economic growth, touching over 7% under the Prime Ministership of Shaukat Aziz, distribution of benefits to the poor has been notably absent. Social barriers such as power structures around kinship, influence, brokering access to market opportunity, are pervasive and entrenched. Without profound social change that manifests itself in the attitudes of the rulers of the country – the feudal and business elites, and the military – the poor (who make up between 25-60% of the population, depending on whose definitions and statistics are used), and above all,

1. The TNSM is a militant Islamist group whose stated aim is to enforce shari’a law in Pakistan. Founded by Sufi Mohammed in 1992, imprisoned in January 2002 and the group banned by the former President Pervez Musharraf, it is now led by Sufi Mohammed’s son-in-law Maulana Fazlullah. It took over most of the Swat region of the country in 2007 and following the siege of the Red Mosque in 2007, it formed an alliance with Baitullah Mehsud’s Tehrik e Taliban e Pakistan. Sufi Mohammad renounced violence in 2008, following his release from prison.

2. Author of Taliban (2001); and Descent into Chaos (2008).

the socially-excluded (who may or may not be poor, but who are excluded from access to opportunity and assets, by virtue of their identity not being part of mainstream Sunni Islam), will continue to lack a substantial stake in the country's economic future. This however is presently looking bleak.

The rule of President Pervez Musharraf, from 1999 to 2008, was characterised by an economic boom. But, just as elections were held in February 2008, that boom was turning to bust. Inflation is now running at some 25%, while the currency and the stockmarket have been pummelled over the last year. Much of Pakistan's textile industry, which had accounted for about half of its exports, is closed as a result of chronic power shortages and lack of competitiveness. Income support mechanisms such as Bait ul Mal, intended to deliver subsistence support to the indigent, suffer from "too little, too late", poor targeting, and leakage. The recently-created Benazir Income Support Programme is unlikely to deliver much better, in part due to the continued structural barriers to access (even for the very modest amounts of handouts at this level).

Though Pakistan's banks are barely integrated into the global system and thus the financial crisis has yet to hit, but given that almost half its exports go to the European Union or America, the textile industry is likely to be hard hit. The economic downturn will have massive political and social consequences. Furthermore, Pakistan's economic development over recent decades has been uneven, with the Punjab, with Lahore as its capital, far outstripping the rest of the country. In Baluchistan, Pakistan's largest but most sparsely populated province, the threat from Afghan Taliban elements is compounded by a long-running Baluch nationalist rebellion. Punjab, by far the most populated and richest province, is also threatened by extremists in its midst.

At the level of the mass of the population, the pre requisites for a stable, secure society – physical, economic and social security; and above all, predictability and constancy, are lacking. Price inflation has been at over 25% since early 2008; regular, protracted power cuts are devastating industry and making ordinary people's lives a misery; and the almost "whimsical" approach of the administration to matters which are basic to people's lives - running water, power supply, transport - with men, women, children living in a permanent state of uncertainty, unable even to take the normal daily routine for granted.

Filling the Vacuum

A chilling speech was made by Sufi Muhammad of the TNSM on April 18 2009.³ In it, he basically puts forward six premises for the overthrow of the Pakistani state, and calls for all Mus-

lims to join in the struggle of the Taliban to overthrow the existing democratic constitutional order in Pakistan for the establishment of their version of an Islamic State.

First, he asserted that Shari'a (*in the way it is interpreted by the Taliban*) is seen as a divine law.

Second, he defined a Muslim not just in terms of someone who believes in the Oneness of God and the fact that Muhammad was the last prophet of God, but as one who supports and helps to implement the Shari'a (significant because of the recent acquiescence by the government to the "Nizam-e-Adl" (the imposition of Islamic law) in the region of Swat controlled by the TNSM).

Third, he called the existing democratic order an "un-Islamic system of the infidels" and that supporting such a system was a great sin. This persistence of the "un-Islamic system of the infidels" in his view, would destroy Pakistan. He and

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his supporters would defend the country, by attempting to establish their version of the Shari'a.

Fifth, the higher courts of justice in Pakistan were presented as part of the "un-Islamic system of infidels" and therefore rejected as institutions where legal appeals against Qazi (Shari'a law) courts were to be made. Instead he claimed that such appeals would be made before the soon-to-be-formed institution of "Dar-ul-Qaza".

Lastly, the system of justice established in Swat as an application of the Taliban version of Shari'a under the "peace deal", was seen by Mr. Sufi Muhammad as only the first stage of the implementation process of Shari'a. According to him, this process would be completed only when it encompassed the institutional structures of Pakistan's polity, economy and education. Is anyone listening to this clarion call for revolutionary overthrow of the present Pakistan polity?

A recent article in the *International Herald Tribune* (April 17 2009 Jane Perlez and Pir Zubair) puts forward the idea that the struggle in Swat is class-based, because large landlords have been targeted (among others) by the TNSM. Is it class struggle, or religious interpretation? Swat is no more nor less (and indeed, arguably less given the egalitarian tribal *ethos* of the NWFP) class-ridden than other areas of country where feudalism is deeply embedded, such as in the continuing phenomenon of bonded labour in Southern Punjab and Sindh, and the continued existence of private jails on the estates of landlords and tribal leaders in parts of Baluchistan and Sindh.

In reality, it is far more likely that these by virtue of their status, were members of the tribal *jirgas* who took a stand

3. See the article by Dr Akmal Hussain in the *Pakistan Daily Times* April 20 2009.

against the Pakistan Taliban in the region. Class may have played a small part, but fear of resisting those clearly in command of power and who dispense summary, violent, and arbitrary justice in the Valley, is likely to have been a stronger force.

In Pakistan, rather than class warfare at the grassroots level, it is more to do with the old debate about the relationship of Islam with the Pakistani state. It is also about how the rapacious ruling elites have repeatedly failed to live up to the promise of building a democratic, constitutional state and exercising power within the limits of the law. They have flagrantly violated their end of the social contract, and have thus weakened both the system and their own moral authority.

Religion is embedded in Pakistani society, its culture and values system, and is equally a very strong force that shapes social institutions and the general attitudes of people. Pakistan is, after all, the only state in the modern world apart from Israel that was founded on the basis of religion. It is thus a fundamental part of Pakistan's identity. However, it is not religion which is at risk. Rather, it is the liberties of the citizens and the idea of a free society that are at risk if a monolithic view of religion replaces pluralism of belief.⁴

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Can the Taliban or similar groups be the alternative to these largely discredited ruling elites? Islamists in many contexts have used religion as an alternative way of organising society and a panacea for all the evils inflicted by traditional elites. However, a key question for Pakistan, is that of “whose Islam” is being promulgated as the solution.

Whose Islam? The Clash of Civilisations

A recent book by Ali Allawi⁵ discusses the crisis of Islamic civilization – the factors behind what he calls the decay of the spirit of Islam – not in the piety of Muslims, but the collective failure to come up with an adequate, effective response to Western modernity; the failure to anchor the self in genuine Islamic principles (which are as much about inner spirituality as outward religiosity); and the loss of cultural creativity, the decay of the Islamic city, and the time-honoured traditions of craftsmanship, community.

This has particular resonance for the ideology of Pakistan, both because of its geographically-strategic location between Afghanistan and India; and because of the hitherto diverse interpretations of Islam which strongly included the Sufi interpretations traditionally held in much of the Subcontinent. There has been a near-total erosion of the space for the mystical, tolerant, folk-based Sufi Islamic tradition, which has been taken over by the imposed neo-Wahhabi puritanical version of Islam imported from Saudi Arabia by the late military dictator, General Zia ul Haq, which disdains folk Islam with its individualist heterodoxy. Today, President Zardari is reportedly a great admirer of Sindhi Sufi poetry. As the writer Mohammed Hanif puts it, if he had read much of it, or for that matter, Punjabi, or Pashtu Sufi poetry – he would know that it is full of more warnings about mullahs than all the CIA's country reports lined end-to-end.⁶

The Battle for Change

Dr. Akmal Hussain's article (quoted earlier), concludes that there is “a high quality military mind” behind the Taliban strategy in Pakistan (evidenced in his view, by their installation first in the tribal areas, then across Swat, followed by guerrilla raids on the cities, and then through the establishment of strongholds in urban centres across the country through

the opening of the space via the Swat peace agreement – in all the big cities, such as Lahore, Multan, Karachi, and Quetta, thus encircling the country). Chilling, indeed, and given the close ISI-army-Taliban links of the past, quite possibly true. However, at the local level, critically, in view of

the state's abject failure to provide access to justice, the Pakistan Taliban have also established grassroots-accessible, if draconian, judicial systems – a crucial step in the light of the overall failures of state governance institutions, despite a few beacons of democratic hope like the February 2008 elections; and the reinstatement of the Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhury on March 15 2009.

The question therefore, is: “what is to be done”?

Eloquent civil society activists including Harris Khalique,⁷ Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy⁸ and others describe how the battle for Pakistan's survival as a modern state is rooted in ideas, in development benefits, and access to rights and justice. They see it as a battle of bigotry, obscurantism and reactionary thought, legitimized by violence, to impose a particular brand of Islam on others by all possible means which has to be joined head on. Part of that battle has, in their view, to be fought on the streets of Pakistan, where

4. See Rasul Bakhsh Rais Pakistan Daily Times April 21, 2009

5. The Crisis of Islamic Civilisation, Ali A. Allawi, Yale University Press 2009

6. See The Power of the Pulpit: The Saudi-isation of Pakistan, Mohammed Hanif (author of the book A Case of Exploding Mangoes).

7. See his article Side Effect: Rehman Baba, in Pakistan's The News, Friday March 6, 2009

8. Nuclear scientist and professor of physics at Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad.

the people need to come out and ask for their right to a safe, secure and decent life. They have to ask for their legitimate right to employment, education, health, clean drinking water and basic infrastructure. They have to assert their right to a life with dignity where the justice system works and where all citizens are equal in the eyes of the state whether they are women or religious minorities. Admirable, but given the woeful historical lack of any broad-based grassroots movement for social change in the country, despite periodic valiant pockets of activity such as the labour movement, the Okara farms resistance to military land grabbing in the Punjab, the resilient fight against General Zia's Hudud ordinances by the women's movement, how likely is this, in reality?

In a lecture in mid-April, Dr. Hoodbhoy posed the question of whether the Taliban could win, in Pakistan. A growing number of U.S. intelligence, defense and diplomatic officials have concluded that there is little hope of preventing Pakistan from disintegrating into fiefdoms controlled by Islamist warlords and terrorists. "It's a disaster in the making on the scale of the Iranian revolution," said a U.S. intelligence official with long experience in Pakistan who requested anonymity because he wasn't authorized to speak publicly.⁹

Ahsan Iqbal, a top aide to the opposition leader and former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (who recently rejected President Zardari's call to join the government) has said the insurgency can be quelled if the government rebuilds the judicial system, improves law enforcement, compensates guerrillas driven to fight by relatives' deaths in security force operations and implements democratic reforms. "It will require time," said Iqbal. "We need a very strong resolve and internal unity."

Time? Lacking.

Resolve? Present, for some, certainly.

National unity? There are no shortage of voices like those of Hoodbhoy or Khaliq. The problem is, who listens to and acts on them?

In the practical sense, they are heard only by the literate (by definition, since they write mostly in English, and are read by a minority, and even when translated into Urdu, high levels of illiteracy prevent access by the majority of the rural and much of the urban population).

However, translation is not the solution.

What is needed is for the state to stand up - strongly and visibly to the big bully in the playground; to listen to, and act upon, the voices of reason promoting social justice, equity, and a stake in society and the future for the mass of Pakistan's population. All the formal and non-formal institutions of society need to come together, to stand up and be counted, the army included.

Will this be done in time to prevent the collapse of the Pakistani state, at best into fragmented provinces, at worst, into chaotic revolution? Judging by recent expansionary activities of the TNTM, and the weak stance of the present government, this is still very much "to be decided....."

Many believe the army (always a critical player in Pakistan, irrespective of the type of government in power) is still both fighting and aiding the Taliban; that it is complicit in the take-over of Swat; and that it still believes that there are "good" and "bad" Taliban.

The acquiescence of the Parliament to the "Nizam-e-Adl" legislation in Swat, which saw a near-total lack of debate and questioning which was not visibly informed by any independent research or expert testimony, signals disturbing possibilities. Either its members are too afraid to stand up and be

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counted, or lack the foresight to predict the national impact of this action.¹⁰ Either way, not good.

Even though some of the protagonists differ - for example, the traditional power of the bazaar merchants in Iran is absent in the equivalent commercial sector in Pakistan - do any of the elected representatives remember the situation in Iran, in late 1978-79, how that has played out in both social and economic terms, and actually think that the majority of the people of Pakistan - or indeed, the ruling elites themselves - will be better off under such a scenario? The actors may differ, but the results may not. Worse still, an Afghanistan-like descent into chaos and anarchy may this time around really be on the cards.

9. Jonathan S. Landay, McClatchy Newspapers Thursday April 16

10. See article by Seher Tariq, Friday, April 17, 2009 in Jang Newspaper