

ISAS Brief

No. 332 – 17 June 2014

Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239
Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



Pakistan at the Centre of Muslim World's Convulsion

Shahid Javed Burki¹

Introduction

The Muslim world is once again in turmoil. The Taliban struck Karachi's Jinnah International Airport on 9 June 2014 and occupied it for several hours. The intruders were ultimately overpowered and killed. All of them were reported to belong to the Uzbekistan Islamic Front, an outlawed group that wants to turn the Central Asian nation into an Islamic state. Its objectives are similar to those of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). This attack on the airport put an end to Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's strategy of solving the problem of extremism by negotiating peace with the TTP. A couple of days after the episode in Karachi, Sunni extremists in Iraq overran Mosul, Tikrit and other towns in the area, putting the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki under great pressure. Panicking over these developments, United States President Barack Obama seemed ready to jettison a doctrine he had laid out a few days earlier during the commencement address at the West Point Military

¹ Mr Shahid Javed Burki is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at sjburki@yahoo.com. Opinions expressed in this paper, based on research by the author, do not necessarily reflect the views of ISAS. During a professional career spanning over half a century, Mr Burki has held a number of senior positions in Pakistan and at the World Bank. He was the Director of China Operations at the World Bank from 1987 to 1994 and the Vice President of Latin America and the Caribbean Region at the World Bank from 1994 to 1999. On leave of absence from the Bank, he was Pakistan's Finance Minister, 1996-97.

Academy. According to the evolving doctrine, the use of force would be the last resort to achieve desired objectives. Institutional mediation and alliance-building would take precedence over military action. However, on 12 June, in a brief statement made at the White House, the American President seemed inclined to provide military help to the Maliki regime in Iraq to stop the advance of the Sunni extremists.

Is there a connection between these two sets of events? For the moment these two countries are in trouble for not being able to develop political institutions that would accommodate diverse ethnic and religious interests. Over time turmoil in these two countries may create instability in large parts of the Muslim world. If the developing situations in Iraq, Syria and Pakistan bring into greater focus the old Sunni-Shiite divide we may witness a great upheaval in the Muslim world.

I will seek to provide an overview of how extremism has struck deep roots in the Pakistani soil. This phenomenon is made up of several strands. What is of considerable significance is that they are coming together in Karachi, a mega-city of 20 million people. While the Taliban story is well known, what is not fully appreciated is how this particular group has associated itself with two other developments in the city. Sectarianism has taken an ugly turn while three competing ethnic groups in Karachi are using violence as the preferred form of political expression.

ISI and the Birth of Terrorist Organisations

The Taliban movement is nearly two-decades-old. Its development was encouraged by the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), Pakistan's premier spy agency. Initially the group drew its foot soldiers from the dozens of seminaries that were established along Pakistan's long border with Afghanistan. These schools were meant to educate the Afghan youth who had moved into Pakistan with their families to escape the war involving the occupying forces of the Soviet Union and the *mujahideen* groups who were fighting them with assistance given by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United States. The Pakistani Government headed by President Zia ul Haq, the country's third military ruler, insisted that all finance and material should flow to the *mujahideen* groups through the spy agency. This was agreed to by the United States, and as a consequence the ISI acquired an enormous amount of power. It used this power to spread its wings. The *mujahideen* succeeded, the Soviet Union departed from Afghanistan, but the

groups which had fought against occupation forces couldn't agree among themselves as to how the liberated country would be governed. A power vacuum developed, and the ISI went to work again. With its help, a new group, the Taliban, was able to overpower the *mujahideen* groups and established a primitive religious state, calling it the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Having succeeded in the Afghan effort, the ISI turned its attention towards Kashmir, a territory in dispute between India and Pakistan for decades. The Pakistani spy agency used the same tactics it had employed in Afghanistan. It worked with Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), a Punjab-based extremist group in Pakistan that also recruited young men from the seminaries it had set up. The LeT-trained young 'soldiers' were infiltrated into the part of Kashmir that is under Indian control. India responded by placing half a million soldiers in the state to suppress the insurgency. However, as happens so often, such groups develop their own agendas. This happened for both the Taliban and the LeT. In the LeT's case, there was a shift in the organisation's attention from Kashmir to India itself. The group trained and despatched a group of terrorists to penetrate the defences of Mumbai and create havoc in the city. The attack on 26 November 2008 left 168 people dead and seriously soured relations between India and Pakistan.

The Taliban, a group that was located in Pakistan's unruly tribal belt bordering Afghanistan, took a different route. It turned against the Pakistani state, borrowing its philosophy and mode of operation from the Al Qaeda. It began to put pressure on Pakistan to Islamise its political and judicial systems. The Taliban wanted Pakistan to become the centre of a new Islamic caliphate which would exert its influence over other Muslim states in the area. Pakistan was an attractive place to begin such a revolution. It has a large arsenal of nuclear weapons. Once under the control of a Taliban government, it would have considerable leverage to bring about the transformation of the Muslim world.

The Karachi Conundrum

While the Taliban was developing its operational capacity, other changes were occurring in Pakistan, in particular in Karachi. By the time of the first Afghan war (1979-89) Karachi had already exploded into mega-city with 10 million people. Dominant in this population was the city's *muhajir* community, descendants of the refugees who had migrated from India to

Pakistan after the departure of the British from the subcontinent. By 1989, the community numbered more than 4 million people.

The community had also organised itself into a political party called Muttahida Qaumi Movement. The new party successfully participated in a string of elections held in the 1990s and 2000s in which it won most of the seats reserved for Karachi in the national and provincial assemblies. Its success had come at the expense of the original inhabitants of Karachi, the Sindhis. The latter group were dominant in the party founded in the late-1960s by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Called the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), it often governed from Islamabad while the MQM held power in Karachi. A clash between these two political forces was inevitable. These two distinct groups, unable to resolve their differences by the use of political processes or to realise their aspirations by working within the political system, fought each other in the city's streets. Consequently there was a great deal of killing in the early-1990s. One result of all this was the weakening of the provincial government of Sindh.

While this conflict was heating up, another ethnic group arrived in Karachi. There were waves of migration of Pashtuns from Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal areas, each responding to different episodes of violence in those parts. By 2013, there were 5 million Pashtuns in the city. Their population was large enough to challenge other ethnic groups politically, but more importantly – and for Karachi more unfortunately – violently in the streets. These three ethnic groups used violence to create political and economic space for themselves. Karachi became ungovernable. It also became the world's most violent mega-city. It was also clear that a lot of Taliban activists moved into Karachi and settled there. The Taliban, in turn, brought its foreign guests and collaborators – among them the Arabs, the Chechens, the Uzbeks, the Uighurs.

To this situation of perpetual and violent conflict was added another element – the age-old Sunni-Shiite rivalry. There was a large presence of Shiites in the *muhajir* community, while the Pashtuns have always been hostile to this sect of Islam. While not fighting the state and other ethnic groups, the extremists among the Pashtuns trained their guns on the Shiites. More than a hundred people were killed in sectarian violence in January 2014. If this conflict develops further, as it might, it could draw in Sunni and Shiite countries into the fray. There is some danger of Pakistan becoming another Iraq.

Extremism and Terrorism Shift to Karachi

From the perspective of the terrorist organisations, Karachi presents an opportunity to project themselves to the world at large. The way the Karachi airport attack was planned and executed was meant to draw as much media attention as possible. That happened. By sending in the Uzbek fighters, the TTP was telling the world that it has the support of not just the Pashtun population but also of the international *ihadists*. The city has a number of other advantages for this terrorist group. There are 5 million people in the city from the same ethnic group as most members of the TTP. The Pashtun settlements are located around the city's periphery, close to the main highways that connect it to the hinterland and close to the Hub River Station that supplies a significant amount of electricity to the metropolis. The terrorists are thus in a position to choke off vital supplies to the large city. The TTP is also convinced that its hideouts in the wild areas of North Waziristan will be attacked by the military. Such an assault cannot be mounted on an urban area such as Karachi. It appears, therefore, that Karachi might see more terrorist activities in the days to come. Pakistan is engaged in a long, bitter and bloody struggle.

.