

91 PAKISTAN: BACK TO THE FUTURE?

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At the start of 2014, a number of Pakistan's leading analysts identified what they saw as the major challenges facing the country: (i) extremism and violence, (ii) weak governance, (iii) the economy, and (iv) the imperative of a changed foreign policy towards the neighbours.¹

Half way through 2014, and at the end of the first year of the third Nawaz Sharif government, the attention is focused on two of these imperatives: extremism and governance. Pakistan faces a triple challenge in this regard: from the resurgence of militant mullahs in the capital to the power struggle inherent in the government-military relationship, the most recent chapter being the government's entanglement with the independent media. How these challenges play out

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A root problem is that all madrassahs of whatever persuasion have little or no government oversight, including on the content of what is taught there.

The failure to develop a national narrative against militancy, coupled with the lack of a clear, mutually-agreed, operationalised strategy on the part of the army and government to combat terrorism and address governance issues, is perhaps the single most important challenge for Nawaz Sharif to address.

One of the most vocal independent television stations, GEO, has been charged by a range of religious leaders with blasphemy.

In foreign policy terms, there are signs of a recognition by the army that the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan in any significant form would in all probability ultimately result in a Taliban(esque) government in Islamabad.

The last time Saudi Arabia stepped in to support the martial law regime of General Zia ul Haq, Pakistan saw the rise of an overlay of the Wahhabi Sunni version of Islam that sowed the seeds of militant fundamentalism in the country, and radically changed the social fabric of the country.

will affect Pakistan's future and will have international repercussions. Geopolitical factors of concern include the impact of any *quid pro quo* to be expected by Saudi Arabia for bailing out the Pakistani economy with its recent US\$ 1.5 billion "gift"; the potential implications for any export of *jihad* from Pakistan to Syria that might be demanded in return; and the effects of regional relationships on the development of a united stance against domestic militants within Pakistan.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has been head of government three times. The last time round, he was deposed in 1998 by a military coup led by General Musharraf. However, even those who consider that periods of military rule are a root cause of Pakistan's many problems, also regard the current judicial processes against Mr. Musharraf as overly-antagonistic.

And the Pakistan army has a strong reputation of looking after its own. The jury is therefore still out on how this situation may unfold.

1. Jinnah Institute, January 1 2014: "Thought Leaders from Pakistan Identify Key Challenges for 2014".

When Mr. Sharif was elected in May 2013, questions were raised about how he may have changed, and how might the new Nawaz “mellowed” in political terms by years of exile - in none other than Saudi Arabia, Pakistan’s financial benefactor. Some, however, still see Sharif as having remained an “unreconstructed” politician –promoting the same policies, the same ideas, the same choices of self-interest over national urgencies, the same tendency to promote the largest, most populated province of the Punjab at the expense of the rest of the country, as a type of extension of the Sharif business empire– (to wit, recent Punjab to Punjab commercial overtures to India by his brother Shahbaz, Chief Minister of the Pakistan Punjab).

From the perspective of policies towards the neighbours, the way in which this triangular relationship between the mullahs, the military and the media unfolds, and the consequent institutional responses, has more than a solely domestic impact. Countries in the region are concerned that the Pakistani military and political elite cannot maintain law and order in large parts of the country. Further afield, fears over the vulnerability of the nuclear arsenal remain vivid in the West.

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The upcoming change of President in Afghanistan and the arrival of the “pro-business” (but rightwing) Hindu-nationalist conservative BJP government and its Prime Minister Narendra Modi in India, will also affect –and be affected by- the seemingly perennial circle of the military, the government and the *madrassah* radicals who have seen an upsurge in recent months in Pakistan. Sharif’s attendance at Modi’s inauguration and the pro-active handshake that the former initiated, was broadly speaking well received within Pakistan, holding out a new possibility of state to state rapprochement with India, though this initial reaction was tempered following the Indian news conference on the content of the subsequent discussions between the two heads of state. However, progress on any front does not entirely lie in Sharif’s hands.

While the prospect of economic cooperation with the Modi government offers Pakistan a much-needed opportunity to bolster its own economy, this also depends on how things play out in India itself. There is an inherent danger that if Modi’s campaign pledge to reform India’s economy does not work out fast enough for him, the right wing of the party (including the *Sangh Parivar*) will take over the ideological agenda – which is likely to be pro-nuclear, anti-Muslim, and hostile to Pakistan. Unfortunately, many analysts conclude that it is going to be extremely difficult for Modi to deliver on the economy in the immediate future and thus meet the high demands of the constituency that voted him into power. Should he choose to revert to communalist politics, negative blowback on Pakistan is highly likely, including the creation of a window of opportunity for non-state actors.

In Afghanistan, from next year, without the NATO presence, militants will much more easily melt into Afghanistan should the Pakistani army attack them. And it remains to be seen how Pakistan will react should India provide significant military support to the Afghan National Army. Furthermore, if the chips really go down in terms of blowback on Pakistan, it is only the army that will be capable of dealing with the militants. Greater political realism will be required in this changed international context, both within the military and by the government - and fast: the danger of a nuclear-powered nation’s “descent into chaos”, as in the title of Ahmed Rashid’s eponymous book, is still unfortunately present.

Domestically, the effects of ongoing extremism and militant violence experienced almost daily in one form or other in Pakistan negatively impact on a number of critical factors including social stability, socio-economic development, and governance. But it is the failure to address extremism, militant and sectarian violence that has led to a vicious cycle of creeping radicalism, to a deeply disturbing extent. Indeed, in the view of one analyst cited by the Jinnah Institute: “*radical Islamic elements have as much - if not more - power over Pakistani society than the state*” - attributed in part to the lack of a coherent narrative against militancy. Not only there is still no overall political and military strategy to combat Islamist extremism, what policy there exists, is selective, being soft on those who target India.

The Reappearance of the Militant Mullahs: Back to the Future?

A worrying development is the recent public reappearance in Islamabad of the radical cleric Maulana Abdul Aziz, coupled with the apparent lack of will on the part of the government to take steps against the (relatively small number) of radical *madrassahs*. This raises disturbing spectres of the prolonged initial period of inaction over the occupation of the Lal Masjid mosque in Islamabad, which subsequently led to the “siege of the Red Mosque” in 2007 under the Musharraf government.² The same apathy is being seen again this year: on March 3 a militant offshoot group (named the Ghazi Force after Maulana Abdul Aziz’s brother Abdul Rashid Ghazi), is thought to have been behind a suicide attack in Islamabad on March 3 this year, which killed –among others– a liberal-

2. In 2007, Abdul Aziz and his brother Abdul Rashid led a band of students from the Jamia Hafsa seminary and others in a campaign of moral policing in Pakistan’s capital - which resulted in them being charged with kidnapping, assault and abuse. The standoff with authorities also involved the issuing of several fatwas -religious edicts- against the military campaign targeting armed groups such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), declaring any soldiers taking part to be “non-Muslim”. A military operation finally took place, during which the seminary and adjacent Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) were besieged for seven days, involving almost daily clashes between security forces and Aziz and Rashid’s followers, who also launched raids on nearby government buildings. More than 60 people were killed on both sides. Rashid was among the dead and Aziz was arrested while trying to escape the seminary disguised in a burqa. In February 2014 Mr Aziz was one of five people nominated –but since dropped- by the Pakistani Taliban to represent it in peace talks with the government.

minded judge who outraged extremists when he rejected a petition for Mr. Musharraf to be tried for ordering the raid on the Red Mosque in 2007.

Some religious seminaries -*madrassahs*- are known strongholds of radical Islamist teaching. But not all. A root problem is that all *madrassahs* of whatever persuasion have little or no government oversight, including on the content of what is taught there. Bad for educational standards, certainly, but worse still for the spread of militant Islamist ideology and its cooption of the space left by the weak writ of the state. Indeed, as pointed out recently by Asad Hashem, the current lack of oversight of *madrassas* has both security and governance ramifications: two seminaries in Islamabad have reportedly been identified as working “for the success of *Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) operations... and providing support for their operations in Islamabad and Rawalpindi*”, as well as providing “*ji-hadi training*”. The seminaries are reportedly ready to be used as support bases for potential TTP attacks in the capital, in the event of a military operation against the group.³

The disturbing continuity of institutional ambiguity towards radicalism, similar to that witnessed in early 2007 under General Musharraf, before the army finally went into the Red Mosque, can be observed in the stance of the present government towards (radical) *madrassahs*, including their regulation – which goes little beyond the mainstreaming of reformed curricula. Ironically, seven years on, it is Musharraf who is on trial for treason and Abdul Aziz who is free, rebuilding his power base and defiantly renaming Jamia Hafsa Library (linked to the Red Mosque) after Osama bin Laden.

A further cause for concern in terms of the institutionalisation of radicalism, is that opposition to reform has come not just from the *madrassas* themselves, but from religious political parties, which contend the government has no business interfering with religious education. Indeed, senior lawmaker Akram Durrani, whose JUI-F party runs a network of seminaries across Pakistan, resigned his cabinet position over the issue.

What is also clear however is that speaking out against radicalism carries a heavy price.

In 2011, the Governor of the Punjab province, Salman Taseer was assassinated by his own bodyguard, for supporting the (Christian) victim of a blasphemy case. His assassin was showered with rose petals. Three years on, April and May saw targeted assassination attempts on a well-known liberal journalist, Raza Rumi in Lahore, which resulted in the death of his driver; on Hamid Mir, an independent television chan-

nel talk show host, in Karachi; and the lawyer Rashid Rehman was shot dead in Multan (Punjab province) for acting as the defence for a man from the banned Ahmedi sect accused of blasphemy. Such attacks on those who speak out in public in favour of democratic processes, freedom of speech and against the rising tide of radicalism, are cause for considerable concern. Not only is freedom of speech *per se* at stake, but also tragically, in today's Pakistan, it has become easier to shoot those whose opinions one may disagree with, than to discuss or debate them in public or take recourse to a court of law.

The Military

The relationship between the army and the civilian government has long been a bone of contention in Pakistan and at present is being played out under the microscope of the ongoing trial for treason of ex-President and former General Musharraf. The recent escalation of tensions between the government and the independent media, specifically over GEO television station, further complicates the picture.

It is the failure to address extremism, militant and sectarian violence that has led to a vicious cycle of creeping radicalism

What is significant here is that both the outcomes of Musharraf's trial and how the GEO situation is dealt with, are likely to affect government-military relations in the near term future.

On the one hand, Nawaz Sharif holds a strong hand. The Prime Minister faces no real opposition; he has a moderate Chief Justice and a handpicked Chief of Army Staff, and will soon have a new Director General of the country's security agency the ISI. If Musharraf were to be convicted, arguably, Nawaz Sharif would have a pliable army, too – depending in part however on what happens with India and with the government stance towards the independent media. He would also have considerable power, once again. But the question remains, how will he use it? Musharraf's conviction is likely to be viewed as overly-antagonistic, even by those who are not in favour of military rule. Furthermore, a pliant army and a powerful government with a large majority could centralise power even further in Sharif's hands. The question is, how would he exercise it? Will he show vindictiveness or clemency towards the man who once deposed him? Will Pakistan see a further slide towards religious conservatism, if not outright militancy, given the Saudi factor? Could Sharif leverage his potentially stronger relationship with the army towards bringing about genuine progress on India? Or will the Punjab province go it alone with commercial ties to India, leaving the less well-resourced provinces even further behind, economically? Or will apathy and inconsistency continue, despite the possibilities for change that a powerful government holds in its hands?

3. Asad Hashim, "Pakistan Mulls Tighter Controls on Madrasahs" in Al Jazeera English April 21 2014

At present, this power is still tempered by disagreement between the army and the government on how to deal with violent Islamist militants. Adding the GEO situation to this mix, where the Ministry of Defence became involved, coupled with uncertainties over Modi's real stance towards Pakistan –the inaugural handshake notwithstanding- the army may well take a strong line. What happens domestically in India will therefore affect Pakistan. For example, the appointment of Sanjeev Baliyan, the local MP who is accused of a role in last year's riots in Muzaffarnagarh, Kashmir, as a minister in the Modi government raises disquieting spectres of the Gujarat riots that occurred on Modi's watch in 2002. This could have a blowback on the ever-present, unresolved Kashmir dispute which remains at the heart of Indo-Pakistani relations.

The Militants

Efforts to negotiate a peace deal with violent Islamist militants have seen government-appointed representatives periodically meet with representatives of the banned TTP. A

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stop-start ceasefire was agreed, but violence continues. The army is reportedly keen to go in against militant sanctuaries in North Waziristan, a region it says must be subdued before NATO combat troops leave neighbouring Afghanistan in nine months' time. It fears the TTP will stall for time. At the time of writing, the recently-announced split between the two leading factions of the TTP make the continuance of talks with the government unlikely. The failure to develop a national narrative against militancy, coupled with the lack of a clear, mutually-agreed, operationalised strategy on the part of the army and government to combat terrorism and address governance issues, especially in the areas of main recruitment for militants, including the Federally-Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) is perhaps the single most important challenge for Nawaz Sharif to address. The selective schizophrenia of targeting some radical groups but not others, is underlined politically by other seemingly inconsistent institutional actions such as giving a parliamentary seat to a member of a banned sectarian group accused of inciting anti-*Shi'a* violence. Such actions do not inspire confidence in the state's ability to deal effectively with non-state actors – despite some reports indicating that this might be a *quid pro quo* for Mr Sharif using the (Punjabi) MP, Mr. Ludhianvi in peace talks with the banned *Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP).

Even though in mid March a National Internal Security Policy that estimates the threat to Pakistan as existential was approved, and seems to assure that there is some coordination among Pakistan's security agencies, the jury is still out on whether, and when, the government will actually act deci-

sively against terrorism – notwithstanding recent military operations in Northern Waziristan (which is only part of the problem and does not address the militant problem coming out of the Punjab).

The Media

May 2014 has seen one of the most vocal independent television stations, GEO, pitted against the Pakistan Intelligence Service (the ISI) and the Defence Ministry, following allegations by a brother of GEO talk show host Hamid Mir that the ISI was behind the attempt on Mr. Mir's life. The subsequent tit for tat exchange culminating in accusations of "blasphemy", which carries the death penalty in Pakistan, against GEO (and consequently its owners), also raises murkier questions. A surprisingly broad-brush set of critics have come out in support of the verbal attack on GEO by the government, ranging from the (opposition) politician Imran Khan, to Hafiz Saeed of the banned militant Lashkar e Tayyeba, and –the mullahs again– a range of religious leaders that have charged GEO with blasphemy. This puts the GEO affair at the centre of the prevailing civilian-military tensions, including because some analysts see it as having constrained the ability of the military to become involved with politics - a departure from previous patterns. An additional factor is that GEO's business success has brought it powerful enemies. And in Pakistan, blasphemy charges are often used as a cover for the furthering of economic interests.

This newfound media strength thus opens up a third bone of contention for government-military relations, along with the Taliban peace talks and the fate of General Musharraf. However, it is above all the problem of the Pakistani Taliban and how the government will face up to them, which is an existential issue for the country. In foreign policy terms, there are signs of a recognition by the army that the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan in any significant form would in all probability ultimately result in a Taliban(esque) government in Islamabad. However, in the context of the government's attempts at peace talks with the Pakistani Taliban, whilst arguments can be made based on global experience that talking to terrorists to engage them in non-violent politics can eventually bring peace dividends –for instance, in Northern Ireland and in Sri Lanka- a key point is that, for a long time, all these talks took place in utmost secrecy. This allowed progress to be made without providing a public platform (and hence ideological legitimacy) to terror groups that, like the TTP, had carried out extremely violent acts against the state and its people in the name of ideology. The point here is that by holding talks publicly, as opposed to privately and unpublicised, the undoubtedly good intentions on the part of a government can be badly sabotaged, because it gives militants currency, and elevates its representatives to the same level as government interlocutors, as representatives of the state.

Forward into the Present?

The “if’s” on the future of Pakistan under Nawaz Sharif still abound, the India handshake notwithstanding. Little has changed one year into his term of office on the key issues of militancy, the economy and governance, though in fairness, the issues at stake have never been easy to resolve. One of the most disturbing elements of this triple challenge, from which much else that is problematic in Pakistan derives, is the absence of the rule of law. In other countries (e.g. South Korea) this has been imposed by the military, subsequently opening the way to democracy. A key issue in Pakistan is that historically, both the military (for instance under General Zia ul Haq) and democratically-elected governments have been tried and found wanting in terms of seriously addressing extractive economics, nepotism, perpetuation of feudal structures, and corruption, as well as the all-important equitable application of the rule of law.

Notwithstanding, there is a clear recognition articulated by Pakistani analysts of the threat to the country that internal militancy continues to pose. As Cyril Almeida said recently: *“Let’s remind ourselves about the TTP and what it stands for. The TTP is explicitly fighting for the violent overthrow of the Pakistani state and the installation of an explicitly undemocratic mode of governance rooted in an explicitly narrow and intolerant version of Islam.”* (Dawn Newspaper, 07.04.2014)

Equally clear is that the ways in which the military-government relationship in Pakistan, the government, ISI and army stances towards militancy, and uncertainties over the relationship with the new Indian government, play out will impact not only Pakistan, but also India itself, Afghanistan and the broader region. Factoring in the international dimension will be an important part of the equation.

Blowback from upcoming changes in Afghanistan will affect Pakistan – positively, should stability be maintained, but negatively, if there should be an inflow of Afghan refugees after the election outcomes take hold, or in the event of a Taliban return in one form or other. So too will the outcome of the signing (or not) of the Basic Security Agreement in Afghanistan; and the number of foreign troops remaining in Afghanistan. In the absence of international funding support, any move towards the expansion of the drug economy there will not leave Pakistan untouched, either.⁴ Thus, the anticipated “panacea” of the exit of foreign troops and the ending of drone attacks so reviled by Pakistan (as well as Afghanistan), could well turn sour, depending on what happens to the Afghanistan economy and the extent of external support for the Afghan National Army and for development interventions.

On the economic front, in March 2014, Pakistan received a boost from a gift of 1.5-2 billion US dollars - estimates vary – from an initially coyly-named “unidentified” source’s (now known to be Saudi Arabia) to bolster Pakistan’s near-bottom of the line foreign exchange reserves. The much-vaunted personal relationship between the Prime Minister and the Saudi Kingdom was cited as the overt reason. Shortly after, early April saw a return by Pakistan to the bond market after an absence of 7 years. Yet, this is not necessarily the boon it appears to be at first sight, because the jury is still out on what is expected in return. In diplomacy, there is no such thing as a free lunch. For members of Pakistan’s pro-Saudi lobby, the support is a repeat of Riyadh’s past benevolence, such as the practically free oil given to Pakistan for three years after Islamabad’s 1998 nuclear tests. It is argued by many that without the previous Saudi largesse, the economic sanctions following Pakistan’s entry to the global nuclear club could have had a significantly more crippling effect on the country. Yet, in 2014, the stakes are much higher for Pakistan than they were in 1998.

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stan saw the rise of an overlay of the Wahhabi Sunni version of Islam that sowed the seeds of militant fundamentalism in the country, and radically changed the social fabric of the country.

This time round, in the absence of a strong US/Western presence in Afghanistan and changing power relations in the Gulf and across the Levant, the consequences of how things play out in Pakistan are likely to be far-reaching. The conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon appear to be increasingly merging into a single, sectarian war, as commented on recently by Borzou Daragahi, stretching from the Zagros Mountains to the Mediterranean, in which he cites Rami Khoury, Director of the Issam Fares Institute, who calls it “a single operational arena in terms of the ease of movement of fighters and weapons.”⁵ Added to this volatile mixture are increased global-regional levels of corruption – what the journalist Robert Fisk has dubbed the new geopolitical belt of “Mafiastan”, a future Middle East run by Mafia money – already being witnessed, according to Fisk, in relation to the oil economy of southern Iraq.⁶

Will the price exacted in return for the gift to bail out the Sharif government and the Pakistani economy be providing nuclear warheads to an increasingly unstable and jittery regime in Saudi Arabia, keen to re-exert its influence, including in the Levant and Syria, in the face of a strengthened Iran?

4. See Safiya Aftab, *Post 2014: The Regional Drug Economy & Its Implications for Pakistan* http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/stap_rp/policy_research_papers/post_2014_the_regional_drug_economy_and_its_implications_for_pakistan

5. Borzou Daragahi, *Financial Times*, May 27 2014

6. Robert Fisk, “The Middle East we must confront in the future will be a Mafiastan ruled by money”, *The Independent*, 20 April 2014

There are reports that the government of Pakistan has agreed to supply Saudi Arabia with anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles, which could easily be passed on to the Salafists fighting against the regime in Syria. Will this lead Pakistan see the “export of *jihād*” to Syria, as part of its tacit required support to the Kingdom? And what will be the effects of this volatile cocktail on the development of a united stance against homegrown militants in Pakistan? How will military-media-government tensions condition the latter’s stance on militancy - which in turn will impact on all of the above? And finally, what would be the effect on the power of the military –traditionally hawkish on India– of an easing of the tensions between the two countries?

All these questions remain unanswered, but they are relevant enough to raise the international community’s awareness on Pakistan’s volatile developments. They are potentially highly destabilizing for a region that may tend to be overlooked, once the West’s Afghan nightmare, with the fatigue it has engendered, finally fades away.