



Bad News Makes Headlines:

Security challenges posed by Pakistan

ippr Commission on National Security, Background Briefing Note 1

By Katharine Adeney

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Introduction

Pakistan does not often make international headlines, but on the occasions in which it does it is portrayed extremely negatively and as a failing state¹. Various, Pakistan is blamed in the press for harbouring al-Qaeda terrorists, tensions with India, the training of fighters in Afghanistan, and for exporting nuclear technology. Although often grounded in fact, most reports are written in unnecessarily alarmist fashion.²

At no time was this more strikingly demonstrated than in the aftermath of the attacks in New York and Washington D.C. in September 2001, with the erroneous predictions of a spectacular and imminent downfall of the military regime in Islamabad.³ Coverage of demonstrations on the streets at the time made for good TV, but concealed the fact that these demonstrations were relatively small affairs, and that the regime was in no danger as long as the army remained united behind Musharraf's decision to support the West. Much of the reporting of the July 2005 bombings in London took on a similar style, concentrating on links between the British-born terrorists and Pakistani Madrassahs, with the latter being blamed for radicalising the bombers. Such reporting ignored the fact that the majority of Madrassahs in Pakistan are *not* training grounds for suicide bombers and that the bombers were radicalised *before* they travelled to Pakistan.

This is not to deny that in recent years anti-Western feeling has grown in Pakistan, that Madrassahs have proliferated, and that sectarian violence has increased, nor that by most well-informed observers' accounts, elements within Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI), a powerful part of the security apparatus of the Pakistani state, continue to support the Taliban (see, for example, Rashid 2003, Gall 2007). But it is to say that Pakistan is too important, especially in the wake of the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, for alarmist views of the situation to distort a more sober understanding of the dynamics of the country's politics and their implications for Western policy. This background briefing paper attempts to redress the balance.

Pakistan and the West in the post-9/11 environment

General Musharraf's acquisition of power in October 1999, although welcomed by many Pakistanis, led to the expulsion of Pakistan from the British Commonwealth and the

snubbing of the country by President Clinton on his visit to the region in March 2000. The events of 11 September 2001, however, reversed this position. In US eyes, Pakistan became a crucial ally in the 'war on terror' while inside Pakistan itself, decisions were taken to publicly set the country on a new course.

Musharraf has stated that his choice at the time was to support the US in its attack on Afghanistan or face being 'bombed back to the Stone Age' (Musharraf 2006: 201). But this was not the only reason for Musharraf choosing to support the US. Pakistan's rival and neighbour, India, pledged immediate logistical and military support to the US. To allow India to usurp Pakistan's longer term position as the US's ally in the region was unthinkable. In addition, Pakistan had been reconsidering its relationship with the Afghan government for some time and American support, which has been vital to Pakistan in the past (especially its military establishment), would enable Pakistan to come in from the cold and provide it with much needed economic and political support. Musharraf was, and is, also a secularist. His condemnation of the World Trade Center attacks in unequivocal terms was sincere (and most Pakistanis were as horrified as he was).

For much of the period since 9/11 Musharraf has been feted by the West and described as a bulwark against both radical Islam and the horror of a nuclear-armed Islamicist state in South Asia. He has, moreover, often been depicted as struggling to keep the radicals at bay. This picture has systematically under-estimated his own strength (provided the army and, in particular, new army chief Kayani stay united behind him) while over-estimating the strength of Islamic political forces in Pakistan and over-simplifying Musharraf's and the army's real relationship with them.

Historically, despite Western perceptions of the radicalisation of the country, Islamic parties have secured little electoral support. The success of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) Alliance in the 2002 elections was the exception rather than the rule – explainable by opposition to the US action in Afghanistan and the anticipated invasion in Iraq, as well as by Pakistani establishment collusion.⁴ That said, Musharraf has, when it has suited his purposes and interests, used the support of such Islamic political parties. The MMA has opposed him on many issues – including his retention of the position of army chief and the passing of the Women's Protection Bill in 2006, which adjusted many controversial elements of the Hudood Ordinances, introduced by Zia-ul

1. For example, a recent leader entitled 'Pakistan: the world's most dangerous place' (*The Economist* 2008).

2. An example of such writing style, as written by Peter Preston in *The Guardian* (16 July 2007): 'It is possible that an Islamabad coalition ... might buy Pakistan more time and stop it toppling over into anarchy, a nuclear-armed, technologically advanced state of 160 million people without any means of settled governance.'

3. McCarthy (2001) made such a prediction, for example, which I rejected at the time: see Adeney (2001).

4. In this election the MMA secured 11 per cent of the national vote, formed the provincial government in the North West Frontier Province and was part of a governing coalition in Baluchistan (for more details see Adeney 2007a:138-141).

Haq 'to bring Pakistan's legal system closer to the precepts of Islam' (Kennedy 1988: 307).⁵ But it has also supported him from time to time and was instrumental in confirming the constitutionality of Musharraf's decrees before his 'election' as President, and in brokering truces between the Taliban and the Pakistani army in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Musharraf has been happy to receive this support, not only to reinforce his rule, but because the apparent weight and significance it bestowed upon Islamic forces in the country was a crucial part of his strategy to play up the Islamic 'threat'.

Another instance of this was the stand-off in Islamabad over the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque), an institution with a well-known history of radicalism and links to the North West Frontier Province and FATA. In April 2007, the leaders of the mosque, brothers Maulana Abdul Aziz and Abdul Rashid Ghazi, 'announced plans to establish new Islamic courts and urged ... followers to stage suicide attacks if their Taliban-style movement was blocked' (Bokhari 2007). Musharraf came under intense pressure from liberal elements in Pakistan to take action against the leadership of the Mosque and eventually did so only after several months and after receiving protests from the Chinese government over the kidnap of several Chinese nationals in Islamabad (they were accused by radicals of running a brothel).

Many in the West saw this entire episode as an example of the extremism that was taking over Pakistan and of Musharraf's inability to confront it. However, this reading ignores the fact that there were prior links between the Lal Masjid clerics and the ISI and that the clerics were allowed to stockpile arms during the siege (Khan 2007, Shaikh 2007). It also ignores the fact that Musharraf saw advantage in allowing the stand-off to continue, precisely to play up the danger of Islamic radicalism at a time when he was coming under pressure from the Supreme Court over his decision to remove the chief justice, Iftikhar Chaudhry. Both the stand-off, and the subsequent demonstrations against Musharraf's eventual use of force to end the siege, ultimately strengthened the perception in the West that Musharraf was playing the role of 'bulwark against extremism' and did so without ever putting his regime in real jeopardy. To say, as some did against the backdrop of these events, that Pakistan had become 'all but ungovernable'⁶ was a major misjudgement of what was going on.

Even worse, this over-played debate on the threat to Musharraf from Islamic radicalism within Pakistan masked the much more important issue of Pakistan's relationship with

the Taliban. This is far from straightforward, particularly in the post 9/11 environment. The ISI was instrumental in the formation of the Taliban in the early 1990s (Ziring 2004: 283) and ISI's former head, Hamid Gul, has made no secret of his continued support. Some Pakistani military and ISI officials, moreover, see the Taliban as an important partner in a strategy to promote a friendly Pashtun government in Afghanistan, significant for countering Indian and Iranian influence in the country. Pakistan is also concerned that after NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, whenever that might be, it would be faced with a political vacuum that it will have to fill in order to prevent any other regional power from acquiring a predominant influence (Grare 2007: 43). As was the case in the mid-1990s, the Taliban is the mechanism by which it would do this. Although Pakistan denies it (see for example Karamat 2007), many neutral observers consequently conclude that the ISI has been involved in re-arming the Taliban.

This, of course, is directly counter to what is being demanded of Pakistan by the West and the issue could not be more explosive, since NATO action in Afghanistan has resulted in many Taliban fighters seeking refuge across the Pakistani border in the FATA and using bases in these areas to continue their campaign. These areas of Pakistan have never been integrated into the normal provincial structure of the country. In an attempt to make its writ run in these territories, the Pakistani government has, under US pressure, deployed 100,000 troops there, sustaining many more casualties than NATO forces in Afghanistan in the process (with more than 700 troops killed and 1,500 injured). Despite these casualties, the US has begun to state publicly that Pakistan is behaving disingenuously, arguing in particular that a now collapsed deal, brokered in September 2006, to withdraw the Pakistani army from the area in return for the FATA tribal leaders' agreement to expel foreign militants, showed a lack of commitment on the part of Musharraf to deal with the Taliban. The US National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of July 2007 also voiced these reservations and advocated unilateral action by the US government in the FATA. Demands for unilateral US action in the FATA have comprised an important part of the election rhetoric of many candidates in the presidential primaries. Musharraf has publicly and stridently opposed this and it is the issue of US involvement in internal Pakistani politics, more than a groundswell of support for radical Islamic movements in Pakistan, that has the potential to drive a wedge between Pakistan and the West.

5. In particular, the crime of rape no longer had to be 'proved' by the presence of four male witnesses.

6. As suggested in an article in *The Times Online*, 'Pakistan's Catch 22', 6 July 2007.

The weakening of Musharraf, and the assassination of Benazir Bhutto

Despite disagreements over the handling of the Taliban, at the beginning of 2007 Musharraf looked almost unassailable, barring a successful assassination attempt. Things had changed dramatically by April, however, after country-wide protests against the dismissal of the chief justice in March, ostensibly on charges of corruption but in reality because he had demonstrated himself to be a dangerously independent force, including expressing doubts as to whether Musharraf could continue as army chief if he were re-elected as president. (For background to the dismissal and protests see Adeney 2007b.)

Pressure on Musharraf was also coming from outside the country, principally from the US. With his constitutional term as president coming to an end at the end of 2007, the US leaned on Musharraf to return Pakistan to democracy and, as the principal mechanism for smoothing the way on this, to do a power-sharing deal with Benazir Bhutto, leader of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). It was hoped this would have some appeal for Musharraf himself, since the PPP's moderate agenda complements his own secular leanings better than the agenda of the Islamic MMA. Ratcheting up the pressure, in July, the US Congress also passed a bill tying future aid to Pakistan to effective democratisation and progress in 'eliminating from Pakistani territory any organisation such as the Taliban, al-Qaeda, or any successor, engaged in military, insurgent, or terrorist activities in Afghanistan' (United States Congress 2007).

It was this combination of civil society and international pressures, not the forces of radical Islam, that presented Musharraf with a choice. Either he could make a deal with the PPP that would require him to step down as head of the army, although retaining his position as president, a move that would condemn him to political irrelevance sooner rather than later, or he could declare a state of emergency to protect his position, arguing that events in the 'war on terror' required 'a dire need for unity of command in governance' (Musharraf 2006: 177). In the event, despite a power-sharing deal with Benazir, Musharraf declared a state of emergency in November in anticipation of the Pakistani Supreme Court's judgement that Musharraf's re-election as president was unconstitutional. The state of emergency was lifted in December and, with elections due to be held in early January, the prospect of a power sharing deal with the PPP still looked possible, despite Bhutto's public rhetoric.

Benazir's assassination in late December 2007 fundamentally

altered the political landscape. The country has been thrown into chaos, although the predictions of a descent into civil war made by some Western media and some self-serving Pakistani politicians were, again, misjudged⁷. At the time of writing, elections in February look likely to go ahead, but whether they will be held under free or fair conditions is much less certain. It is widely accepted that the elections were postponed to prevent the PPP from capitalising on a sympathy vote in the wake of Benazir's assassination.

Implications for Western policy

Given what has happened and given the tendency for many in the West to misunderstand events in Pakistan, it is important now to take stock of the options for moving forward.

Much has been written on the relationship between the democratisation of Pakistan and a possible crackdown on 'extremism'; in fact this supposed relationship was at the core of the US's support of Benazir Bhutto and its continued support of her successors. However, the relationship between the two is complex. A return to democracy would certainly give the government a welcome boost in terms of legitimacy but it is not clear that there would be a major change in tactics in relation to the Taliban and the FATA. Even if free and fair elections for the national and provincial assemblies are held in February 2008, the real power in Pakistan will lie with the army, as it has for some time now, even during 'democratic' interludes (Siddiq 2007). The army and ISI's perceived strategic interests in maintaining a friendly Afghan government (which it associates with a Pashtun-dominated government) will also remain.

The real significance of radical Islamic elements would also be largely unchanged in a democratic Pakistan. There is a relatively small but very vocal section of opinion in the country that strongly opposes the government and seeks to impose its way of thinking by force. Members of that contingent have been involved in assassination attempts on Musharraf, are the prime suspects in the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, and have been responsible for much of the violence and suicide bombings that followed, but also preceded, the action on the Lal Masjid.

But although there are many documented instances of the ISI's involvement with the Taliban, the army is not a hotbed of Islamic fundamentalism (Wirsing 2005: 3). Although anti-Western and particularly anti-American feeling remains strong in Pakistan, the majority of people in the country do not favour a strongly Islamicised polity (*The Daily Times* 2008).

7. As suggested by Wilkonson *et al* in an article in *The Telegraph*, 27 December 2007. Approximately 60 people were killed in the riots that followed Benazir's assassination. This should be compared with the hundreds killed in Kenya, following the disputed elections held on the same day.

Free and fair elections would give voice to the overwhelming majority who oppose the Islamic political parties and those who seek to use violence to further their aims, and even now, an alliance between the PPP and Musharraf could create a strong mainstream alliance to 'take on the groups that were perceived to be directly or indirectly supporting religious extremism' (*Dawn* 2007). In such circumstances, Musharraf would not have the same incentive to play the radical Islamic card to secure support from the US, though this card will be an important element in Pakistani politics for the foreseeable future.

Some organisations, notably International Crisis Group, have argued that no progress can be made on restoring democracy or countering terrorism while Musharraf remains president (International Crisis Group 2008). The problem, as this briefing paper has argued, lies not with Musharraf, but within Pakistan's perceived strategic imperatives and in the army's domination of the state. Even if free and fair elections are held and judicial independence restored, this is unlikely to change.

If US aid were to be seriously linked to progress in fighting the Taliban, it is possible that the army would crack down on the Taliban more seriously, at least temporarily. The strategic alliance with the US is extremely important to the Pakistani state, and to the army as an important component within it. The army would be loathe to risk losing this. However, the fact is that it will be very difficult for any regime in Pakistan to change its policy towards the Taliban and the FATA comprehensively and permanently. In addition, although the majority of the population supported the action against the Lal Masjid, the danger of being perceived as being the stooge of the US is a real one in Pakistani politics. As Wirsing notes, 'Pakistan cannot be expected to give unconditional support to a war on terrorism seen by most Pakistanis as a war on Islam' (Wirsing 2005: 6). And as Ali Cheema opines, '[a]ny political party that attempts to roll back the armed protagonists of a theocratic state and restore the sanctity of Pakistan's borders will be labelled an anti-nationalist [slave] of the US' (Cheema 2007). In particular, any US unilateral action in the FATA as advocated by the NIE Report will massively increase anti-Western feeling among all sections of the Pakistani population.

That said, it is important to reiterate that, although the majority of Pakistan's population oppose Western foreign policy, this does not mean that they support the Taliban or al-Qaeda. The Western democratisation agenda for Pakistan could be compatible with pressure to change the policies in the FATA, although a too-strident approach is likely to further alienate sections of the Pakistani population from the West. In Pakistan more generally, there is a major challenge caused by the massive disparities that exist among the population and between provinces. Inflation, also, is high

and, in *The Friday Times* Moeed Yusuf, while arguing that there are many 'positive' countervailing forces, noted that the 'youth bulge' of economically-deprived but educated young men in Pakistan could lead to the radicalisation of a growing section of the population (Yusuf 2007).

Other policy options must therefore be explored. Frederic Grare, for example, has argued that a democratisation of the tribal regions is the only way to undermine the militants operating there and bring the people of the region into the mainstream (Grare 2007: 31). This deserves more consideration, although it poses its own problems. Attempts to develop these regions with American help will be viewed with deep suspicion, and will also be destabilising in the short term due to the potential for upsetting existing power structures.

Pakistan is therefore invidiously placed – much of Western foreign policy particularly in Iraq has alienated large sections of the population, including those who do not support either the Taliban or al-Qaeda. Similarly, the NATO action in Afghanistan makes the claims of Islamist groups appear more plausible, though the strength of such groups should not be exaggerated. Western policymakers must now show greater understanding of the tensions within the Pakistani state and the economic, demographic and security concerns that underpin them. The coming of democracy would not solve all the problems outlined here and the danger is that while the West behaves as though it can have all its goals met in Pakistan, the strategy of some, particularly in the US, may result in the achievement of none of them.

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