

A New Deal in Pakistan

Wednesday 30 April 2008, by [DALRYMPLE William](#) (Date first published: 3 February 2008).

The province of Sindh in southern Pakistan is a rural region of dusty mudbrick villages, of white-domed blue-tiled Sufi shrines, and of salty desert scrublands broken, quite suddenly, by floodplains of wonderful fecundity. These thin, fertile belts of green-cotton fields, rice paddies, cane breaks, and miles of checkerboard mango orchards-snake along the banks of the Indus River as it meanders its sluggish, silted, café-au-lait way through the plains of Pakistan down to the shores of the Arabian Sea.

In many ways the landscape here with its harsh juxtaposition of dry horizons of sand and narrow strips of intensely fertile cultivation more closely resembles upper Egypt than the well-irrigated Punjab to its north. But it is poorer than either-in fact, it is one of the most backward areas in all of Asia. Whatever index of development you choose to dwell on-literacy, health care provision, daily income, or numbers living below the poverty line-rural Sindh comes bumping along close to the bottom. Here landlords still rule with guns and private armies over vast tracts of country; bonded labor-a form of debt slavery-leaves tens of thousands shackled to their places of work. It is also, in parts, lawless and dangerous to move around in, especially at night.

I first learned about the dacoits-or highwaymen-when I attempted to leave the provincial market town of Sukkur after dark a week before the recent elections. [\[1\]](#) It was a tense time everywhere, and violence was widely expected. But in Sindh the tension had resolved itself into an outbreak of rural brigandage. We left Sukkur asking for directions to Larkana, the home village of the Bhutto family, only to be warned by people huddled in tea stalls shrouded under thick shawls that we should not try to continue until first light the following morning. They said there had been ten or fifteen robberies on the road in the last fortnight alone.

If it is dangerous to travel here at night, it is much more dangerous to declare openly for the candidates you support in the elections. The big landlords here-the zamindars-expect electoral loyalty from their tenants. As the Pakistani writer Ahmed Rashid put it, *"In some constituencies if the feudals put up their dog as a candidate, that dog would get elected with ninety-nine per cent of the vote."* Such loyalty can be enforced. In the more remote and lawless areas the zamindars and their thugs often bribe or threaten the polling agents, then simply stuff the ballot boxes with thousands of votes for themselves. This is sufficiently common for the practice to have its own descriptive term: *"booth capturing."*

Democracy has never thrived in Pakistan in part because landowning has traditionally been the social base from which most politicians emerge, especially in rural areas. Here Pakistan is quite different from India, where the urban middle class quickly gained control in 1947. That class has been largely excluded from Pakistan's political process, as, even more so, has the rural peasantry. There are no Pakistani equivalents of Indian peasant leaders such as Laloo Prasad Yadav, the village cowherd turned (former) chief minister of Bihar, or Mayawati, the dalit (untouchable) leader and current chief minister of Uttar Pradesh.

You can see the results of a system dominated by landowners in a town like Khairpur, a short distance from Sukkur in the northern part of Sindh. As you drive along, the turban-clad head of the local feudal lord, Sadruddin Shah, with a curling black mustache, sneers down from billboards placed every fifty yards along the road. Shah, who was standing, as usual, for no less than three different seats, is often held up in the liberal Pakistani press as the epitome of all that is worst about Pakistani electoral feudalism. After all, this is a man who goes electioneering not with leaflets setting out his program, but with five pickup trucks full of his men armed with pump-action shotguns and Kalashnikovs.

For generations the area has been dominated by Sadruddin's family, the head of whom-currently

Sadrudin's father is known as the Pir Pagara, "the Holy Man with the Turban." The Pir Pagaras are not only the largest and most powerful of the local feudal landowners, but they are also the descendants of the local Sufi saint. Normally Sufism is a force for peace and brotherhood-Islam at its most pluralistic and tolerant. At the other end of Sindh I have attended the annual 'urs-or shrine festival-of the Sufi saint Shah Abdul Latif, where there is ecstatic Sufi music, the singing of love poetry, and men and women dancing together-something that would horrify the orthodox 'ulema.

But Khairpur has a very different and more militant Sufi tradition. The Pir Pagaras have always had their own Hur militia, which once acted as a guerrilla force against the British and now acts as Sadrudin's private electoral army. The week I was in the district the local papers were full of stories of Sadrudin's gunmen shooting at crowds of little boys shouting slogans supporting the recently assassinated Benazir Bhutto, and burning down the houses of those of his tenants who had flown opposition flags.

The leaders of this feudal army were standing for election under the banner of their own pro-Musharraf faction of the Pakistan Muslim League (known as PML-F, in the alphabet soup of acronyms that characterizes Pakistani elections). Against them were ranged the forces of Benazir Bhutto's party, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). Contrary to its socialist-sounding name, the PPP has traditionally also been very much a feudal party that has consistently failed to bring about any serious land reform that would break the power of the landowners. Benazir Bhutto herself was from a landowning feudal family in Sindh; so is Asif Ali Zardari, her widower and the current co-chairman of the PPP, which she left to him and their son Bilawal in her will as if it were a personal possession; so also is Makhdoom Amin Fahim, the most likely candidate for prime minister of the new PPP-dominated coalition.

But things are at last beginning to change in Pakistani politics, and here in Khairpur at least, the PPP candidates were largely

middle-class-a new development in the region. Nafisa Shah, who was one of the candidates standing against Sadruddin, is the impeccably middle-class daughter of a local lawyer, who is currently at Oxford University writing a Ph.D. dissertation on honor killings.

Nafisa's campaign was hugely assisted by a wave of sympathy for Benazir: the day she was assassinated, Khairpur was consumed by riots, and for four days full-scale warfare broke out between Benazir supporters and the local administration, during which the election headquarters of the pro-Musharraf parties and several offices of the local government were burned down.

Partly because of this simmering discontent, outbreaks of violence were predicted on polling day, and everyone was anticipating widespread rigging by Musharraf and his intelligence agency cronies, something to which the Musharraf-appointed election commission was expected to turn a blind eye. This, it was predicted, would be followed by more riots organized by the discontented opposition parties who had been cheated of their votes.

In fact, however, serious violence did not materialize, either in Khairpur or elsewhere, and to general astonishment, Nafisa and her fellow PPP candidates had a remarkably strong victory, monitored and filmed by Pakistan's increasingly fearless and independent press and television. The PML-F was almost wiped out and Sadruddin Shah won only his own home seat-and that with the narrowest of margins.

What happened in Khairpur was a small revolution-a middle-class victory over the forces of reactionary feudal landlordism. More astonishingly, it was a revolution that was reproduced across the country. To widespread surprise, the elections in Pakistan were free and fair; and Pakistanis voted heavily in favor of liberal centrist parties opposed to both the mullahs and the army. Here, in a country normally held up in the more Islamophobic right-wing press of Western countries as the epitome of "what went wrong" in the Islamic world, a popular election resulted in an unequivocal vote for moderate, secular democracy.

For Pakistani liberals, 2007 was one of the worst years in their country's history. In early March, Musharraf suspended Pakistan's chief justice, Iftikhar Chaudhry, accusing him of using his position for personal gain. This was clearly not the case. Chaudhry had a reputation for both integrity and independence, and most assumed that Musharraf simply wanted to replace him with a more pliant judge who would not block his reelection as president.

Some were encouraged by the popular protests mounted by Pakistan's lawyers in response to Chaudhry's suspension-in city after city across the country lawyers took to the streets in their court robes, marching in orderly ranks, three abreast, like emperor penguins in a nature film. But any optimism was quickly dimmed by the heavy-handed response of Musharraf's riot police and the simultaneous growth of Islamist radicalism in the heart of the capital, Islamabad.

This took the form of the heavily veiled, black-clad "chicks with sticks" who, in April 2007, emerged in large numbers armed with bamboo canes from a mosque and madrasa complex in the city center, not far from the headquarters of Pakistan's powerful intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The young women then proceeded to ransack suspected brothels and smash video and music stores in the capital while the police watched, apparently helpless. The bloody storming by the army of their base, the Red Mosque, in early July was followed by an unprecedented wave of suicide bombings and Islamist revenge attacks against the army. In all there were sixty suicide bombings in Pakistan last year, leaving 770 people dead and nearly 1,600 injured.

By autumn the situation had become even worse, with a series of crushing military defeats inflicted on the Pakistani army by the Taliban in Waziristan, the "extraordinary rendition" by Musharraf's officials of the former prime minister and opposition leader Nawaz Sharif back to Saudi Arabia after his return from exile, and the subsequent declaration of an emergency by President Musharraf, who put a number of dissenting lawyers, political opponents, and human rights activists under house arrest. The

disasters reached a horrific climax in December with the assassination of Benazir Bhutto. This led many to predict that Pakistan was looking like a failed state stumbling toward collapse and civil war. The cruel contrast with India, then widely being celebrated as a future democratic superpower on its sixtieth birthday, was unmistakable.

Yet the widespread publicity given to the crisis obscured the important changes that had quietly taken place in Pakistani society during Musharraf's eight years in power. Pakistan's economy is currently in difficulty, with fast-rising inflation and shortages of electricity and flour; but between 2002 and 2006 it had grown almost as strongly as India's. Until the beginning of 2007, Pakistan had a construction and consumer boom, with growth approaching 8 percent; for several years its stock market was the fastest-rising in Asia.

As you travel around Pakistan today you can see the effects of the boom everywhere: in vast new shopping malls and smart roadside filling stations, in the cranes of the building sites and the smokestacks of factories, in the expensive new cars jamming the roads and in the ubiquitous cell-phone stores. In 2003 the country had fewer than three million cell phones; today apparently there are 50 million, while car ownership has been increasing at roughly 40 percent a year since 2001. At the same time foreign direct investment has risen from \$322 million in 2002 to \$3.5 billion in 2006.

Pakistan's cities, in particular, are fast changing beyond recognition. As in India, there is a burgeoning Pakistani fashion scene full of ambitious gay designers and amazingly beautiful models. There are also remarkable developments in publishing. In nonfiction, Ahmed Rashid's book *Taliban* became the essential primer on Afghanistan after 2001. Ayesha Siddiqa's *Military Inc.* and Zahid Hussain's *Frontline Pakistan* are two of the most penetrating recent studies of the country and essential for understanding the politics of Pakistan. Siddiqa is especially good on the economic and political power of the army, while Hussain's book is the best existing guide to Pakistan's jihadis. There have also been

particularly impressive new works of fiction by Pakistani writers, among them Kamila Shamsie's *Kartography* and *Broken Verses*, Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers*, and Moni Mohsin's *End of Innocence*. One of Daniyal Mueenuddin's short stories, his wonderfully witty "Nawabdin Electrician," was published in *The New Yorker* of August 27, 2007.

Recently Mohsin Hamid, author of the best-seller *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, [2] wrote about this change in culture. Having lived as a banker in New York and London, he returned home to Lahore to find the country unrecognizable. He was particularly struck by

the incredible new world of media that had sprung up..., a world of music videos, fashion programmes, independent news networks, cross-dressing talk-show hosts, religious debates, stock-market analysis.... Not just television, but also private radio stations and newspapers have flourished.... The result is an unprecedented openness.... Young people are speaking and dressing differently.... The Vagina Monologues was recently performed on stage in Pakistan to standing ovations. [3]

Such reports are rare in the Western press, which prefers its stereotypes simple: India, successful and forward-looking; Pakistan, a typical Islamic failure. The reality is of course much less clear, and far more complex.

It was this newly enriched and empowered urban middle class that showed its political muscle for the first time with the organization of a lawyers' movement, whose protests against the dismissal of the chief justice soon swelled into a full-scale pro-democracy campaign, despite Musharraf's harassment and arrest of many lawyers. The movement represented a huge shift in Pakistani civil society's participation in politics. The middle class were at last moving from their living rooms onto the streets, from dinner parties into political parties.

February's elections dramatically confirmed this shift. The biggest electoral surprise of all was the success of Nawaz Sharif's conservative faction of the Muslim League, the PML-N. This is a solidly urban party, popular among exactly the

sort of middle-class voters in the Punjab who have benefited most from the economic success of the last decade, and who have since found that status threatened by the recent economic slowdown and the sudden steep rises in the prices of food, fuel, and electricity.

The same is true of the success of the MQM, the Karachi-based party representing the Mohajirs, the emigrants who left India to come to Pakistan at the founding of the country in 1947. Like Nawaz Sharif's PML-N, it is an urban-based regional party attractive to middle-class voters. Almost 50 percent of Pakistan's population now lives in urban areas, and the center of gravity is shifting from the countryside to the large cities. The parties that appealed most successfully to this new demographic trend won the most convincing victories in the polls.

The rise of the middle class was most clear in the number of winning candidates who, for the first time, came from such a background. In Jhang district of the rural Punjab, for example, as many as ten out of eleven of those elected are the sons of revenue officers, senior policemen, functionaries in the civil bureaucracy, and so on, rather than usual feudal zamindars. This would have been unthinkable ten years ago.

Even the most benign feudal lords suffered astonishing electoral reverses. Mian Najibuddin Owaisi was not just the popular feudal lord of the village of Khanqah Sharif in the southern Punjab, he was also the sajjada nasheen, the descendant of the local Sufi saint, and so, like Sadruddin Shah, regarded as something of a holy man as well as the local landowner. But recently Najibuddin made the ill-timed switch from supporting Nawaz Sharif's PML-N to the pro-Musharraf Q-League. When I talked to people in the village bazaar, they all said that they did not like Musharraf, but they would still vote for their landlord.

"Prices are rising," said Hajji Sadiq, a cloth merchant, sitting amid bolts of textiles. *"There is less and less electricity and gas."*

"And what was done to Benazir was quite wrong," his friend Salman agreed.

"But Najib sahib is our protector," said Hajji.

"Whatever party he chooses, we will vote for him. Even the Q-League." "Why?" I asked.

"Because with him in power we have someone we can call if we are in trouble with the police, or need someone to speak to the administration." "When we really need him he looks after us." "We vote according to local issues only. Who cares about parties?"

Because of Najibuddin's personal popularity, his vote stood up better than many other pro-Musharraf feudal lords-and he polled 46,000 votes. But he still lost, to an independent candidate from a nonfeudal middle-class background named Amir Varan, who received 57,000 votes and ousted the Owaisi family from control of the constituency for the first time since they entered politics in the elections of 1975.

As well as a middle-class victory over a feudal past, in the west of the country the election was also an important vote for secularism over the Islamist religious parties.

In the last election of October 2002, thanks partly to their closeness to the ruling military government, and partly to their sympathy with al-Qaeda, the Islamist Muttehida Majlis Amal (MMA) alliance nearly tripled its representation in the national assembly from 4 to 11.6 percent, and swept the polls in the two key provinces bordering Afghanistan-Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province-where they went on to form Islamist provincial governments.

This time, however, religious parties sunk from fifty-six out of 272 seats in the national assembly to just five. In the North-West Frontier Province, the MMA has been comprehensively defeated by the overtly secular Awami National Party (ANP). This is a remnant of what was once a mighty force: the nonviolent and secular Red Shirts movement, which, before the creation of Pakistan, was originally led by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, an important ally of Mahatma Gandhi from the North-West Frontier Province. Ghaffar Khan was locked up by one Pakistani general after another for much of the time between Partition and his death in 1988, but his political movement has survived both the generals and a succession of bomb blasts aimed at its party, and has now-after nearly fifty years in opposition-made a dramatic comeback under the leadership of Ghaffar

Khan's grandson, Asfandiyar Wali Khan.

"Before the Taliban," the North-West Frontier Province "used to be a very liberal area," he told me in Islamabad.

No one can force us to give up that culture-even the suicide bombers. There is a very clear polarization taking place...on one side those striving for peace, nonviolence, and a future of cooperation with the international community, and on the other those who stand for confrontation and hatred. They are men of violence, but we refuse to be cowed. We may lose, but we will make a stand.

In the election, Asfandiyar's ANP routed the Islamists, demonstrating that contrary to their image as bearded bastions of Islamist orthodoxy, Pashtun tribesmen are as wary as anyone else of violence, extremism, and instability. Now the ANP is talking of extending the Pakistani political parties into the troubled northern tribal areas that are federally administered and act as the buffer zone between Pakistan and Afghanistan: "If I am prepared to take on the Maulvis in the tribal areas, why should the government stop me?" asked Asfandiyar. *"At the moment the tribal areas are just left to fester. We have to end that isolation and bring them forward."*

The issues that mattered to voters in the frontier were those of incompetent governance by the MMA, increased insecurity, and especially the fear of constant suicide bombings. Like democratically elected parties anywhere else in the world, the electorate judged the MMA on its record, and threw it out for failing to deliver. There is a clear lesson for US policymakers here. The parties of political Islam are like any other democratic parties: they will succeed or fail on what they deliver. The best way of dealing with democratic Islamists, if Pakistan's experience is anything to go by, is to let them be voted into power and then reveal their own incompetence-mullah-fatigue will no doubt quickly set in. Besieging Islamist parties that have come to power through a democratic vote, as the US has done with Hamas, or allowing local proxies to rig the vote so as to deprive them of power, as happened in Egypt, only strengthens their hand and increases their popularity.

There is an additional reason for modest optimism about Pakistan's future at the moment. In recent years, the biggest threat to the country's stability has come from the jihadi groups created and nourished by the army and the ISI for selective deployment in Afghanistan and Kashmir, but which soon followed their own violent agendas within Pakistan itself. For the last decade, that threat has been exacerbated by the ambiguous attitude toward the jihadis maintained by the Pakistani army and its intelligence services. Some elements have been alarmed by the militants' violence and the effects that supporting these groups would have on the alliance with the US. Others saw them as useful irregulars that could still be drawn on to fight low-cost proxy wars for the army. That era of division and ambiguity now seems to be coming to a close.

On November 24, 2007, a suicide bomber detonated himself beside a bus at the entrance of Camp Hamza, the ISI's Islamabad headquarters. Around twenty people died in what is the first known attack by an Islamist cell against the Pakistani intelligence services. Many of the dead were ISI staffers. This event, coming as it did after three assassination attempts on General Musharraf, several other bomb attacks on army barracks, and the murder of many captured army personnel in Waziristan, is credited with persuading even the most stubbornly pro-Islamist elements in the Pakistani army that the monster they have created now has to be dispatched, and as quickly as possible.

Shuja Nawaz is a Washington-based specialist on the Pakistani army who comes from a prominent and well-connected military family and who is about to publish *Crossed Swords*, an important new book on the army. [4] According to Nawaz,

The direct attacks on the army have shaken up the military at all levels. One of Musharraf's senior colleagues said he was changing his cars daily to avoid being identified when he hits the roads of Rawalpindi. The army brass has been told not to go out in uniforms. Soon, they may stop using their staff cars with flags and star plates.

This is obviously a radically new situation, and one that changes all previous calculations on the part of the military. The Pakistan expert Stephen

P. Cohen of the Brookings Institution agrees with this assessment. He recently told me:

The senior leadership of the army under Musharraf now regards the threat from Islamic radicals as being far greater than the threat posed by India. That conviction has been hugely increased since the suicide bomb attacks on army staff and the intelligence agencies this past December. [5]

This week the news came that the army had rounded up in Lahore an important cell of Lashkar-i-Jhangvi Islamist militants; many more such arrests are expected soon.

Over the last few years there has been something of an existential crisis in Pakistan, at the heart of which lay the question: What sort of country did Pakistanis want? Did they want a Western-style liberal democracy, as envisaged by the poet Iqbal, who first dreamed up the idea of Pakistan, and by the country's eventual founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah? An Islamic republic like Mullah Omar's Afghanistan? Or a military-ruled junta of the sort created by Generals Ayyub Khan, Zia, and Musharraf, who, among them, have ruled Pakistan for thirty-four of its sixty years of existence?

Though turnout in the election was fairly low, partly owing to fear of suicide bombings, it is clear that Pakistanis have overwhelmingly rejected the military and Islamist options and chosen instead to back secular democracy. And if many stayed at home, no fewer than 36 million Pakistanis braved the threatened bombs to vote in an election which by South Asian standards was remarkably free of violence, corruption, ballot-stuffing, or "booth capturing."

A new coalition government now looks likely to come to power peacefully, bringing together Zadari's People's Party and Sharif's Muslim League, and will do so unopposed by the army. These developments should now lead commentators to reassess the country that many have long written off and caricatured as a terror-breeding swamp of Islamist iniquity.

The country I saw in February on a long road trip from Lahore in the Punjab down through rural

Sindh to Karachi was not a failed state, or anything even approaching "*the most dangerous country in the world...almost beyond repair*" as the *London Spectator* recently suggested, joined in its view by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* among many others. On the contrary, the countryside I passed through was no less peaceful and prosperous than that on the other side of the Indian border; indeed its road networks are far more developed. It was certainly a far cry from the violent instability of post-occupation Iraq or Afghanistan.

On my travels I found a surprisingly widespread consensus that the mullahs should keep to their mosques, and the increasingly unpopular military should return to its barracks. The new army chief, General Ashfaq Kayani, who took over when Musharraf stepped down from his military role last year, seems to recognize this. He has repeatedly talked of pulling the army back from civilian life, and ordering his soldiers to stay out of politics. He has also ordered that no army officer may meet with President Musharraf without his personal approval. He also seems committed to maintaining tight security to protect Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.

Pakistan will not change overnight. Much violence and unrest no doubt lie ahead, as shown by the recent assassination by a suicide bomber in Rawal-pindi of General Mushtaq Baig, the head of the Pakistan Army Medical Corps, and continuing bomb blasts in the troubled Swat Valley, once the country's most popular tourist destination. The country still has a vast problem with rural and urban poverty, and a collapsing education system. It also has serious unresolved questions about its political future. As Ahmed Rashid said in a recent interview:

The new coalition government will have to face continuing behind the scenes efforts by President Pervez Musharraf and the intelligence agencies to undermine them even before they are allowed to govern. Musharraf's agents backed by a section of the Washington establishment had been secretly trying to persuade Zardari to go into alliance with the former ruling party-the Pakistan Muslim League-Q group. The Q group has been decimated in the elections-23 ministers lost

*their seats and today it is leaderless,
visionless and without an agenda-except it
remains a pawn in the hands of Musharraf. [*