

Pakistan Needs a Triple Bypass - "This is now Obama's war"

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June is never a good month on the plains. It was 46°C in Fortress Islamabad a fortnight ago. The hundreds of security guards manning roadblocks and barriers were wilting, sweat pouring down their faces as they waved cars and motorbikes through. The evening breeze brought no respite. It, too, was unpleasantly warm, and it was difficult not to sympathise with those who, defying the law, jumped into the Rawal Lake, the city's main reservoir, in an attempt to cool down. Further south in Lahore it was even hotter, and there were demonstrations when the generator at Mangla that sporadically supplies the city with electricity collapsed completely.

As far as the political temperature goes there is never a good month in Pakistan. This is a country whose fate is no longer in its own hands. I have never known things so bad. The chief problems are the United States and its requirements, the religious extremists, the military high command, and corruption, not just on the part of President Zardari and his main rivals, but spreading well beyond them.

This is now Obama's war. He campaigned to send more troops into Afghanistan and to extend the war, if necessary, into Pakistan. These pledges are now being fulfilled. On the day he publicly expressed his sadness at the death of a young Iranian woman caught up in the repression in Tehran, US drones killed 60 people in Pakistan. The dead included women and children, whom even the BBC would find it difficult to describe as 'militants'. Their names mean nothing to the world; their images will not be seen on TV networks. Their deaths are in a 'good cause'.

More than two million refugees ('internally displaced persons' - IDPs in NGO jargon) have been driven out of the areas of the North-West Frontier Province bordering Afghanistan by the army, and from the Swat Valley both by the brutalities of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the military response to them. NGOs, knowing this is where Western cash is headed, swarm around the refugee camps like flies. Here, too, corruption is rife, despite the presence of many dedicated volunteers. One of them told me that the only organised and non-corrupt presence was that of the army, which, if true, must be a first. The same volunteer, who worked in a camp near Mardan, proudly showed me pictures of herself on General Nadeem Ahmed's helicopter - he commands the operation to help the IDPs - while informing me that the overwhelming bulk of refugees blame the United States and the army for their plight, not the 'terrorists' in their various guises. Listening to her, I wondered whether Samuel Huntington's idea of moving peasants into 'strategic hamlets' in South Vietnam had been the model for this operation as well: remove the people from war zones and the enemy will have no one to recruit. It's hardly a secret here that the US is paying the army to build new cantonments in the cleansed zones on the Pak-Afghan frontier. It won't work, but it sounds good and it's good for the army's cashflow. Some in Pakistan seriously believe that a few hundred TTP heads in the basket will solve their problems, and are supportive of the army while distancing themselves from the US use of drones, but the two go together. Others gaze admiringly at the ruthlessness with which the Sri Lankan army rooted out the Tamil Tigers, regardless of the collateral damage.

In May this year, Graham Fuller, a former CIA station chief in Kabul, published an assessment of the crisis in the region in the Huffington Post. Ignored by the White House, since he was challenging

most of the assumptions on which the escalation of the war was based, Fuller was speaking for many in the intelligence community in his own country as well as in Europe. It's not often that I can agree with a recently retired CIA man, but not only did Fuller say that Obama was 'pressing down the same path of failure in Pakistan marked out by George Bush' and that military force would not win the day, he also explained to readers of the Huffington Post that the Taliban are all ethnic Pashtuns, that the Pashtuns 'are among the most fiercely nationalist, tribalised and xenophobic peoples of the world, united only against the foreign invader' and 'in the end probably more Pashtun than they are Islamist'. 'It is a fantasy,' he said, 'to think of ever sealing the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.' And I don't imagine he is the only retired CIA man to refer back to the days when Cambodia was invaded 'to save Vietnam'.

I left Islamabad on 1 July, a day before the Independence Day party held by the US ambassador, Anne Patterson. Probably the most heavily guarded event in the global social calendar, this is the modern equivalent of the viceroy's garden parties in old New Delhi. The leaders of the political, military and economic elite jostle with each other and with favoured journalists for the attention of the ambassador. Observers note that Patterson spent more time talking to X from Baluchistan than to Y from Peshawar. Might this mean that the frontline is going to be shifted to Baluchistan? Less important guests peer over heads and shoulders to see who else is present so that they can determine the pecking order of flattery.

Patterson can be disarmingly frank. Earlier this year, she offered a mid-term assessment to a visiting Euro-intelligence chief. While Musharraf had been unreliable, saying one thing in Washington and doing its opposite back home, Zardari was perfect: 'He does everything we ask.' What is disturbing here is not Patterson's candour, but her total lack of judgment. Zardari may be a willing creature of Washington, but the intense hatred for him in Pakistan is not confined to his political opponents. He is despised principally because of his venality. He has carried on from where he left off as minister of investment in his late wife's second government. Within weeks of occupying President's House, his minions were ringing the country's top businessmen, demanding a share of their profits.

Take the case of Mr X, who owns one of the country's largest banks. He got a call. Apparently the president wanted to know why his bank had sacked a PPP member soon after Benazir Bhutto's fall in the late 1990s. X said he would find out and let them know. It emerged that the sacked clerk had been caught with his fingers literally in the till. President's House was informed. The explanation was rejected. The banker was told that the clerk had been victimised for political reasons. The man had to be reinstated and his salary over the last 18 years paid in full together with the interest due. The PPP had also to be compensated and would expect a cheque (the sum was specified) soon. Where the president leads, his retainers follow. Many members of the cabinet and their progeny are busy milking businessmen and foreign companies. 'If they can do it, so can we' is a widely expressed view in Karachi, the country's largest city. Muggings, burglaries, murders, many of them part of protection rackets linked to politicians, have made it the Naples of the East.

There is also a widespread feeling that the methods used to manoeuvre Zardari into the presidency after Benazir's assassination were immoral. A documentary shown on the first anniversary of her death on the privately owned GEO TV raised a number of serious questions regarding her security and asked why the man responsible for organising her protection drove away when her car was held up. When she was hit, he was nowhere to be seen. This man, Rehman Malik, an old Zardari crony and one of the family's principal contacts with Western intelligence agencies when it was in exile, is currently the interior minister.

For several months now, wild and unsubstantiated rumours linking Zardari to his wife's death have swept the country. A woman I know who was once very close to Benazir is convinced that there is some truth in them and is much irritated by my scepticism. She provided me with an account, which, if true, would require Asifa Zardari, the couple's younger daughter, to give evidence in court against

her father. The same story has been repeated to me by many others, none of them paranoid or given to thoughts of conspiracy. Stranger things have happened in the country, but I remain unconvinced. What is interesting is not that these tales circulate, but the number of people who believe them - which indicates how the widower is generally regarded.

These rumours came into the open at the end of June, when the head of the Bhutto clan, Mumtaz Ali Bhutto, chairman of the Sind National Front, publicly accused Zardari at a press conference, alleging that 'the killer of Murtaza Bhutto had also murdered Benazir . . . Now I am his target. A hefty amount has been paid to mercenaries to kill me.' (Zardari is generally regarded as having ordered his brother-in-law Murtaza's death. Shoaib Suddle, the police chief in Karachi, who organised the operation that led to Murtaza Bhutto's death, has now been promoted and is head of the Intelligence Bureau.) Mumtaz Bhutto demanded an inquiry into Benazir's assassination and pooh-poohed attempts by Washington and its local satraps to blame the crime on the TTP leader, Baitullah Mahsud. Bhutto predicted that Zardari and his cronies would soon be convicted of corruption or forced to flee the country, but this is wishful thinking, and assumes a great deal, including a shift in US policies.

Mahsud and his followers are specialists in sawing off heads, flogging women and kidnapping people. Grisly videos of informers having their throats cut are circulated by the TTP as a deterrent. Yet, only a few months ago, Mahsud could be seen at wedding receptions and press conferences. Today he has the distinction of being the first Pakistani with a price on his head. The US announced a \$5 million reward, to which the Pakistan government added a miserly \$600,000, for his capture dead or alive. Head money has also been offered for Mahsud's junior commanders: \$182,000 for Faqir Mohammed in Bajaur and \$122,000 each for three others, much less than the Indian Premier League offers Pakistani cricketers. While welcoming back the Pakistan cricket team after their triumph in the Twenty20 championship this summer, the country's token prime minister, Yousaf Gilani, insisted that we must follow the example of our cricket team and defeat the terrorists.

The refugees from the Swat Valley, where the TTP have committed serial atrocities, tell a different story from the Pashtuns displaced by US drones, bomber jets and Pakistani army forays in South Waziristan, near the Afghan frontier. They say they were abandoned for years by the government and left to the mercy of armed fanatics. This is true. And if you ask why the Pakistani state tolerated armed groups that openly challenged its monopoly of violence, the answer is straightforward. These groups were regarded in Islamabad as auxiliaries in the coming battle for Afghanistan. The decision to crush the leadership of the TTP was taken under heavy US pressure, which is why Mahsud and his deputy in Swat, Maulana Fazlollah, regard the assault on their positions as treachery.

Fazlollah's reign of terror antagonised most Pakistanis, including those hostile to the US presence in the region. The public flogging of a Swati woman, captured on video and then shown on TV, generated real anger. For once the TTP was put on the defensive and publicly dissociated itself from the flogging. Making use of this display of weakness the government wheeled one of the country's top religious scholars, Dr Sarfraz Naeemi Al-Azhari, in front of the cameras to declare the TTP an 'anti-Islamic' organisation, since Islamic tradition forbids suicide and by extension suicide bombings - for that reason often known as 'martyrdom operations'. On 12 June, the TTP despatched a suicide bomber to take care of Al-Azhari. Both men were 'martyred'. Earlier, the government had bribed, cajoled and bullied one of Mahsud's lieutenants, Qari Zainuddin, to break with his leader and denounce him in public. Qari did as he was asked, though the eventual denunciation was characteristically bizarre. He accused Mahsud of being a triple agent and claimed he was working for India, America and Israel, as well as other enemies of Pakistan. That is why, Zainuddin said, he was targeting the Pakistan army and its security services. Some actually believed this nonsense and it irritated Mahsud. On 23 June, one of Qari Zainuddin's bodyguards shot him dead. There will almost certainly be more of this in the coming months.

Meanwhile Mahsud's parents have been picked up by the police and are in 'protective custody' - in other words, being used as hostages. On the day this was announced, Owais Ghani, the beleaguered governor of the North-West Frontier Province, warned on TV that if the US-Nato leaders don't develop an exit strategy soon, the indiscriminate repression of Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand Line will lead to an uprising against the foreign troops. Mahsud wasn't the only problem, in other words. The following day Pakistan air-force chiefs were paraded on TV with the Chinese ('our all-weather friends') government company that is building JF-17 Thunder aircraft at the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex. Might some of these be ready in time to track down Mahsud, something that US surveillance and reconnaissance missions have so far failed to do?

The TTP is a product of the recent Afghan wars, Russian, indigenous and American, its thinking a poisonous combination of traditional tribal patriarchy and Wahhabi prescriptions. It has been severely criticised by the Afghan groups fighting Nato for not participating in that struggle. Capturing and killing its leaders may make people feel better, but it will solve very little. The bulk of TTP supporters will simply melt away and regroup to fight another day. Attempts to destroy them will lead to even more civilian casualties. Many of Mahsud's supporters are now leaving Swat and linking up with other Pashtun groups in Waziristan to fight the Pakistan army. There are reports that a new organisation uniting the previously competing mujahedin groups has been formed. Gul Bahadur, considered a pro-government Pashtun commander because he signed a truce agreement in February 2008, has reneged on the deal and joined the opposition. This new group claimed responsibility for the ambush of a military convoy on 28 June that led to the death of 15 soldiers in response to air-strikes carried out on villages the week before, in which a number of civilians were killed - their names were not released.

The longer the war continues, the greater the possibility of serious cracks within the army. Not at the level of the high command, but among majors and captains, as well as among the soldiers they command, who are far from happy with the tasks assigned to them. Religious divines have been found to pronounce that a soldier killed in fighting the TTP is a martyr and will go to heaven, but the potential martyrs know that most mullahs believe they will go to hell. Quite a few, no doubt, think they're already there.

P.S.

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