

Pakistan: Next Door To War

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Review of: *Descent into Chaos: How the War against Islamic Extremism Is Being Lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia* by Ahmed Rashid and *Crossed Swords: Pakistan, Its Army, and the Wars within* by Shuja Nawaz. This review is an occasion for Tariq Ali to present a systematic picture of the present political scene in Pakistan.

To recapitulate. After Benazir Bhutto was assassinated last December, her will was read out to the family's assembled political retainers. Her 19-year-old son, Bilawal, inherited the Pakistan People's Party, but until he came of age her husband, Asif Zardari, would act as regent. The general election, postponed following her death, took place in February. The immediate impact of the stunning electoral defeat suffered by General Musharraf's political party and his factotums was to dispel the disillusionment of the citizenry. Not for long. Musharraf is still clinging on to the presidency; Zardari is running the government with the help of his old cronies; the judges dismissed by Musharraf have still not been reinstated; the economy is a mess; and the US Air Force has started dropping bombs on the North-West Frontier Province again. Poor Pakistan.

Forty-five per cent of the electorate voted in the election, more than expected, though the figure was much lower in the Frontier Province, where the spillage from the Afghan war discouraged voters from braving the journey to the polling stations. The new army chief, General Ashfaq Kayani, had ordered the ISI not to interfere with the polls and instructed his generals to cease all bilateral contacts with the now civilian president. Musharraf's defeat would have been even worse had it not been for the violence and vote-rigging in Karachi, where his loyal and armed allies from the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) threatened opposition candidates and their supporters. In at least three cases, armed MQM goons threatened TV journalists with death if the chicanery was reported.

The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) – or BFP (Bhutto Family Party), as some of its own members refer to it in semi-public – emerged as the largest single party in the country, thus propelling the widower Bhutto to power. The Pakistan Muslim League (N), led by the ex-prime minister Nawaz Sharif, came second nationally, but emerged as the largest party in the largest province, the Punjab, where Nawaz's younger brother Shahbaz is now ensconced as chief minister. In the Frontier Province, the secular Awami National Party (ANP) defeated the Islamists, once again contradicting the widespread view that jihadis are either strong or popular in Pakistan. In Sindh the PPP won comfortably and could have governed on its own, but chose to do so with the MQM. In Baluchistan, largely because of military actions in the province, which borders on Afghanistan, and the killings of nationalist leaders, most local opposition parties boycotted the polls, and it was in this province alone that Musharraf's party won a majority of assembly seats.

Five months on, democratic fervour, or naivety, has turned to anger. Old Corruption is back. The country is in the grip of a food and power crisis. Inflation is approaching 15 per cent. The price of gas (used for cooking in many homes) has risen by 30 per cent and the price of wheat by more than 20 per cent since November 2007. Food and commodity prices are rising all over the world, but there is an additional problem in Pakistan: too much wheat is being smuggled into Afghanistan to

feed the Nato armies. According to a recent survey, 86 per cent of Pakistanis find it increasingly difficult to afford flour, for which they blame their new government. Zardari's approval rating has plummeted to 13 per cent. Were an election to be held now, he would lose to Sharif by a substantial margin. That this old rogue is now thought of as a man of principle is an indication of how desperate the situation has become.

Two major issues confronted the victors. The first concerned the judiciary. The chief justice of the Supreme Court, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, had been a prisoner of the regime since 3 November 2007, detained in his own house, which was sealed off by barbed-wire barricades with a complement of riot police permanently on guard outside. His landlines had been cut and cellphones were incapacitated by jamming devices. His colleagues and the lawyers defending him were subjected to similar treatment. In January, he wrote an open letter to Nicolas Sarkozy, Gordon Brown, Condoleezza Rice and the president of the European Parliament. The letter, which remains unanswered, explained the real reasons for Musharraf's actions:

"At the outset you may be wondering why I have used the words 'claiming to be the head of state'. That is quite deliberate. General Musharraf's constitutional term ended on 15 November 2007. His claim to a further term thereafter is the subject of active controversy before the Supreme Court of Pakistan. It was while this claim was under adjudication before a bench of 11 learned judges of the Supreme Court that the general arrested a majority of those judges in addition to me on 3 November 2007. He thus himself subverted the judicial process which remains frozen at that point. Besides arresting the chief justice and judges (can there have been a greater outrage?) he also purported to suspend the constitution and to purge the entire judiciary (even the high courts) of all independent judges. Now only his hand-picked and compliant judges remain willing to 'validate' whatever he demands. And all this is also contrary to an express and earlier order passed by the Supreme Court on 3 November 2007."

Before the election, Sharif had pledged that his party would restore the chief justice and the other sacked judges to their former positions and remove those who had replaced them. The PPP's position on this issue was ambiguous, but soon after their election triumph the widower Bhutto and Sharif agreed publicly that reinstating the judges would be a priority, and promised that they would be returned to office within thirty days of the new government's being formed. Within the month, the judges were released and restrictions on them removed. This was widely, but wrongly, interpreted as a prelude to their reinstatement. Musharraf and his backers in Washington panicked and the US ambassador summoned Zardari. The message from Washington was clear. The State Department was determined to keep Musharraf in power as long as Bush was in the White House. If the chief justice and his colleagues were to resume office, the under-secretary of state told the new government, there was a possibility that Musharraf would be legally removed from office, and that was unacceptable. His removal would be considered a setback in the War on Terror. The issue brought into the open the differences between the widower and Sharif, which were subsequently aggravated when it was made plain that, unbeknownst to Zardari, Benazir had agreed to work with Musharraf in the War on Terror and to sideline the judges.

Zardari had other worries. A National Reconciliation Ordinance which allowed corrupt politicians to be pardoned had been part of the deal between Benazir and Musharraf. It was much detested and the Supreme Court was due to hear an appeal questioning its legality. Zardari, only too aware of the possibility that the cases against him in European courts might be resurrected, capitulated to the US: the judges would not be reinstated or, at least, not on their own terms. Might the chief justice be interested in a senior position on the International Court of Justice, the US intermediary asked, or perhaps a sinecure at some American university? The chief justice declined.

In May, Zardari and Sharif met in London. Two Muslim League parliamentarians flanked Sharif; two

political fixers, Rehman Malik and Husain Haqqani, sat with Zardari. No agreement could be reached on the restoration of the judiciary and, after consulting senior colleagues, Sharif withdrew Muslim League ministers from the government, citing disagreement on this issue. It is extremely rare in Pakistan for a politician to relinquish office on an issue of principle. The ministers who were told to resign were not happy, but they accepted party discipline and Sharif's popularity soared. The widower's failure to support the judges provoked great indignation and a number of senior figures in his own party were clearly unhappy at the public embracing of Musharraf. But they had accepted him as their 'temporary' leader and so rendered themselves powerless. When told that it was really Benazir who had done the deal they replied that just before her death she was beginning to realise she'd made a mistake. There is no evidence for this, although it helps preserve a few illusions. The trouble is that PPP politicians have grown so accustomed to the Bhutto harness that they can do nothing without it. In the PPP the initiative now lies entirely with Zardari and Malik. They make the key decisions. The prime minister, Yousaf Raza Gillani, seems happy in his role as political eunuch; the PPP cohort in parliament is used as a rubber stamp.

The campaign to defend the judiciary constituted the first nationwide mass movement against military rule since 1969. The Supreme Court decisions challenging the legality of the Musharraf regime had restored the country's self-respect. But the judges were not popular in the United States or Euroland, where elite opinion was obsessed with occupation and war. For defending the civil rights of the poor, the chief justice was referred to in the *Guardian* as a 'judicial activist' and a 'firebrand'.

The second major problem confronting the government was the Nato occupation of Afghanistan. Washington and its allies regard the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan's role in relation to it as the central priority. Everything else is a diversion. In March, Admiral Olson, the head of the US Special Operations Command, arrived in Islamabad for consultations with the Pakistan military and surprised locals by demanding a meeting with the country's elected leaders. Olson asked the politicians how they would respond to the US need to make cross-border incursions into Pakistan. The Pakistanis made their opposition clear. The most senior civil servant in the Frontier Province, Khalid Aziz, told Olson that 'it would be extremely dangerous. It would increase the number of militants, it would be . . . a war of liberation for the Pashtuns. They would say: "We are being slaughtered. Our enemy is the United States."' For Sharif, negotiations with militants in Waziristan and a gradual military withdrawal from the area were essential to deter terrorist attacks in Pakistan's cities. The PPP was not prepared to go quite so far, but it was not in favour of Nato raids inside Pakistan, at least not in public. The ANP leaders, who had supported the US presence in Afghanistan, now refused to go along with Washington's demands and called for negotiations with Baitullah Masood, a pro-Taliban militia leader in South Waziristan, accused by the CIA of masterminding Benazir Bhutto's assassination.

Two ANP leaders, Asfandiyar Khan and Afrasiab Khattak, were summoned to Washington for meetings with Stephen Hadley, the national security adviser, and John Negroponte. There was only one issue on the agenda: cross-border raids. Washington was determined to find Pakistani politicians who would defend them. The ANP leaders refused. 'We told them physical intervention into the tribal areas by the United States would be a blunder,' Khattak later told the *New York Times*. 'It would create an atmosphere in which the terrorists would rally popular support.' Owari Ghani, the governor of the Frontier Province and a Musharraf appointee, agreed: 'Pakistan will take care of its own problems, you take care of Afghanistan on your side . . . Pakistan is a sovereign state. Nato is in Afghanistan; it's time they did some soldiering.'

Some light is thrown on the Afghan situation by Ahmed Rashid in his new book, *Descent into Chaos*. As a foreign correspondent on the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and subsequently the *Independent* and *Daily Telegraph*, Rashid has been reporting diligently from the region for more than two

decades; when the publication of his book on the Taliban coincided with 9/11, he was projected to media stardom in the United States, repeating a pattern that introduced the Iraqi-American writer Kanan Makiya and the *Republic of Fear* to the liberal public during the First Gulf War. Both men became prize-cocks of the US defence establishment and the videosphere. Graciously received by Bush in the Oval Office, Makiya strongly backed the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 and predicted that the US would be greeted as liberators, looking forward to the day his friend Ahmad Chalabi would be running a 'liberated Iraq'. It didn't quite happen like that, but fortune favoured Rashid. The first chapter of *Descent into Chaos* lavishes praise on his friend Hamid Karzai and the book is full of sentences like 'On 7 December, with Vice President Cheney in attendance, Karzai took oath as Afghanistan's first legitimate leader for nearly three decades. Many grizzled old Afghan leaders broke down in tears.'

Rashid's real argument can be summarised as follows: the war after 9/11 should have been fought in Afghanistan and not Iraq, which was a diversion. A heavy armed presence was needed. Bush and his neocon advisers have let the side down badly by trusting Musharraf and the ISI. Karzai, a legitimate leader, was prepared to embark on reforms, sidelining the Northern Alliance, but the Taliban were allowed to regroup and create chaos, helped by the conspiratorial and 'Bolshevik-like' al-Qaida. The real problem is Pakistan, not a Western occupation gone badly wrong, and there is no point being squeamish about what needs to be done. Rashid's views coincide with those of the Pentagon hawks who have, for the last year, been pressuring Bush and Rice to unleash Special Operations units inside Pakistan on the pretext that al-Qaida has grown substantially and is preparing new attacks on the West.

Rashid was a firm supporter of the Soviet intervention, although he is coy about this in his book. He shouldn't be. It reveals a certain consistency. Afghanistan, he thinks, can be transformed only through war and occupation by civilised empires. This line of argument avoids the need to concentrate on an exit strategy. Civilian casualties in Afghanistan are high and in the last two months more US and British soldiers have died here than in Iraq. Jaap Scheffer, Nato's secretary-general, told the Brookings Institution in February that the continuing occupation had less to do with good governance than with the desire to site permanent military bases (and nuclear missiles?) in a country that borders China, Iran and Central Asia. Contributors to the organisation's house magazine, *Nato Review*, have argued that the preservation of Western hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region requires a permanent military presence. Whatever the justifications or fantasies, the occupation cannot last, since those who live under it feel they have no option but to back those trying to resist, especially in a part of the world where the culture of revenge is strong.

On 14 May a Predator drone hit the village of Damadola in the Bajaur Agency, close to the Afghan border, and killed more than a dozen people. The US claimed that they had targeted and killed a 'significant leader'. Akhundzada Chattan, the local member of parliament and a PPP veteran, called a press conference and denounced the US for 'killing innocents'. 'The protest lodged by the Pakistan government against the missile raid is not enough,' he insisted. 'The government should also sever diplomatic ties with the US and expel its envoy immediately.' Chattan saw a pattern: whenever the Pakistan government and local insurgents began to talk to each other and discuss a durable peace, Nato targeted the tribal areas inside Pakistan. He appealed to tribal elders, insurgents, the Pakistan army and the new government to cast aside their differences and unite against 'foreign aggression'. This could indicate that Zardari's ascendancy is not as secure as he might imagine. It is also a reminder that the decision of successive Pakistan governments to keep the tribal areas formally separate from the rest of the country has become entirely counterproductive. It prevents political parties and other organisations from functioning in the region, leaving political control in the hands of tribal leaders, often with dire results.

In June two F-15 bombers dropped 500 lb bombs in Pakistan killing 11 soldiers and a major from the

Frontier Corps. The Pentagon described the action as 'a legitimate strike in self-defence', leading Brian Cloughley, an extremely conservative historian of the Pakistan army (and a former commandant of the Australian Psychological Operations Unit in Vietnam) to write:

"One can only regard such utterances with contempt, because those who spoke in such a way, and those who ordered them to say what they did, have no concept of loyalty to a friendly country. Nor, for that matter, do they take the slightest heed of international law and custom. The Pentagon quickly distributed a video showing an attack that was said to be a strike on an 'enemy' position. There was no indication of where it was, when it was, what ordnance was used, or results of the attack. It was a fatuously amateur exercise in attempted damage control. And of course, later, in the inevitable reassessment (for which read: 'We've been found out and had better think up a more believable version of the lies we told'), it was revealed that 'a US Air Force document indicates bombs were dropped on buildings near the border, and Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman conceded there may have been another strike that occurred outside the view of the drone's camera.'"

Pakistan's ambassador in Washington, Husain Haqqani, merely denied that the air strikes had been intentionally hostile and stressed the 'improving' . . . partnership between the two countries. Cloughley's links to GHQ in Islamabad stretch back several decades and it was clear he was giving the view of many senior officers in the Pakistan army, men who fear that such actions and the alliance with Washington will undermine the much vaunted unity of the military high command, with unpredictable and dangerous consequences.

There are three interrelated power blocs in Pakistan. Of these the US lobby is the most influential, the most public and the most hated. It is currently running the country. The Saudis, who use a combination of wealth and religion to get their way, are second in the pecking order and less unpopular. The Chinese lobby is virtually invisible, never interferes in internal politics and for that reason is immensely respected, especially within the army; but it is also the least powerful outside military circles. In Cold War times, the interests of the three lobbies coincided. Not now. The War on Terror has changed all that.

What is missing is a Pakistan lobby, a strong group within the ruling class that puts the interests and needs of the country and its citizens above all else. A survey carried out in May for the New America Foundation revealed that 28 per cent of Pakistanis favour a military role in politics as compared to 45 per cent in August 2007; that were elections to be held now, Sharif would sweep the board; that 52 per cent regard the United States as responsible for the violence in Pakistan; that 74 per cent oppose the War on Terror in Afghanistan. A majority favours a negotiated settlement with the Taliban; 80 per cent hold the government and local businessmen responsible for food scarcity; only 11 per cent see India as the main enemy.

Given the political conjuncture in the country, the publication of Shuju Nawaz's *Crossed Swords: Pakistan, Its Army and the Wars Within* is timely. He overlooks links between military entrepreneurship and corruption, but nevertheless this is the best researched and most serious history of the Pakistan army. Nawaz, a former IMF staffer who lives in Washington, had unprecedented access to the military archives. Belonging to a military family, he was treated as an insider and interviewed numerous army personnel. His brother Asif Nawaz was the army chief when he died suddenly and mysteriously in January 1993. His widow received letters suggesting murder. Some were anonymous, two were not. One was from a servant at Prime Minister's House. He named senior government officials who, he alleged, had told him to put poison in the food served to the general. It was widely rumoured that Sharif (then the prime minister) had had General Nawaz poisoned because a military operation in Sindh against the MQM had embarrassed the government (then in alliance with the MQM) and Asif Nawaz was obstinately refusing to allow a cover-up and,

more important, could not be bought off. Sharif denounced these reports. When traces of arsenic were found in the dead general's hair, Shuja Nawaz fought for a new investigation and the body was exhumed. The military establishment closed ranks and the official inquiry, supported by evidence from US medical experts, upheld the result of the original autopsy: the general had died of a heart attack. Perhaps he did. As with much else in the book the incident is described dispassionately, both sides of the argument are clearly laid out – yet another unsolved mystery involving an illustrious corpse for Pakistan to consider. There might be more of these if the war next door continues.

P.S.

* From the London Review of Books, July 17, 2008.

* Tariq Ali's new book, *The Duel: Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power*, will be published by Simon and Schuster in September.