

## **Pakistan's drift into the hands of extremists**

The intention of the attack on Sri Lanka's cricket team was to send a clear message to Washington: Pakistan is ungovernable

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The appalling terrorist attack on the Sri Lankan cricketers in Pakistan had one aim: to demonstrate to Washington that the country is ungovernable. This is the first time that cricketers have been targeted in a land where the sport is akin to religion. It marks the death of international cricket in Pakistan for the indefinite future, but not just that, which is bad enough. The country's future is looking more and more precarious. We do not know which particular group carried out this attack, but its identity is hardly relevant. The fact is that it took place at a time when three interrelated events had angered a large bulk of the country and provided succour to extremist groups and their patrons.

The first is undoubtedly the foolish decision by Washington (backed by Britain) to send more troops to Afghanistan, which has now united all those resisting them in that country and the North-West Frontier province of Pakistan. Instead of searching for a viable exit strategy, Obama has gone for a surge. On several occasions, I have warned that escalating the war in Afghanistan could seriously destabilise Pakistan and its army.

Second, Senator Dianne Feinstein's revelation that the US drones being used to target "militants" and "terrorist havens" inside Pakistan were, in fact, being despatched by the US from military and air-force bases inside Pakistan (obviously, with the approval of the Pakistani military and civilian leaders) created mayhem in the country. The shock and dismay should not be underestimated. Half-hearted government denials further fanned the flames. Since many in the country regard Zardari and his cronies running the country as US drones, the anger was multiplied.

Domestically, the country is a mess. The People's party has learnt and forgotten nothing. Corruption is rife and stories circulate linking the money being paid by bankers directly to the president's house. Add to this Zardari's refusal to honour an election pledge restoring an independent judiciary, and his decision to manipulate tame judges to disqualify his opponents has not gone down well. The controversy was aggravated by Zardari's move to dismiss the elected government in the country's most populous and strategically important province, the Punjab (capital: Lahore), and impose direct rule, after its chief minister apparently refused to accept a bribe in the shape of a lucrative business deal in return for abandoning the fight to restore the chief justice fired by the military leader over a year ago.

The failures of this government and its inability to defend the country's interests or its population from drones or terrorist attacks are paving the way for the return of the army to power as a way of avoiding a serious split within its own ranks. All that is awaited is a green light from the US embassy in Islamabad. Not that this would solve anything, but it might create the illusion of stability for a few months. It's no good Pakistani politicians mumbling that this is "our Mumbai". The fact is that, over the last year, the Zardari government has done a great deal for itself and its clients, but nothing for the people or the country. The more Pakistan drifts, the more opportunities offer themselves to the extremists.

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**P.S.**

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