

Interview

Pakistan's Permanent Crisis

Tuesday 12 May 2009, by [ALI Tariq](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2009).

TARIQ ALI IS the author of numerous political books and essays, as well as a filmmaker and novelist currently working on the fifth and final work of his “Islam Quintet,” which will focus on the end of the Muslim-ruled Al-Andalus civilization in Spain. (The most recent of these novels is A Sultan in Palermo.) In March he spent three weeks as a visiting professor and lecturer at University of Michigan-Flint. On March 14, he spoke with David Finkel and Dianne Feeley from the ATC editorial board.

Although living in Britain, Tariq Ali was born in Pakistan and was a prominent political militant there in the 1960s, so we began by asking his views on the crisis in his native country. Our discussion took place just one day before the stunning victory of the democratic lawyers’ struggle for the reinstatement of the Supreme Court judges who were sacked by the former military dictator Musharraf. This was also his first visit to Detroit and Flint, so we wanted to get his impressions of the industrial ruins he witnessed after a tour of the former Motor City. [ACT]

We are reproducing below the the first part of this interview, originally published under the title “Crisis from Pakistan to Motown”, which concerns Pakistan. [ESSF]

TARIQ ALI: Unfortunately there appears only one way the crisis in Pakistan can go — toward another military takeover. In the past 60 years we have had this cycle of politics in Pakistan — military takeover, mass unrest followed by elections, then civilian government which is usually so corrupt that people get fed up and the military takes over again.

This time around the timing seems to be telescoped, in that the current regime is so corrupt, so incompetent, incapable of defending its own people or asserting its monopoly of violence, that it's very unlikely that it will last too long.

The United States of course plays a key role — it's very amusing to see Richard Holbrooke offering instructions to the government to make a deal with the opposition but not to reinstate the Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Choudhry, who was sacked by the previous dictatorship, and who was very popular in Pakistan but hated by the United States. He defended civil liberties and ordered that detainees be produced in court. [It appears that U.S. policy changed as the mass movement led by the lawyers threatened to bring down Pakistan president Ali Zardari's government — ed.]

Choudhry had accepted a legal appeal from the steelworkers' union protesting the privatization of the industry. Pakistan has never had anything remotely like this. The Chief Justice became the only figure who was trusted in the country. The latest mass movement into the streets is a demand for his reinstatement. This would be a tremendous democratic victory.

But behind all this crisis of course is the war in Afghanistan and the fact that the United States is now mired there, and that the Obama administration doesn't appear to have any exit strategy. Sending troops to secure the roads in Afghanistan is itself an indication that they cannot win this war, and they know it. So what they will do is an open question, but the longer they stay the worse for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

At this point, how long the United States will stand behind Ali Zardari remains to be seen. If the law and order situation gets totally out of control, the military will say to Washington, these guys can't handle it and we need a green light to take over — and the United States will probably agree, although reluctantly.

I don't think Obama has all that much time. When they met before Obama became president, Zardari — who's a brainless business type — kept referring to him as "Senator Osama."

ATC: What's the present situation with the notorious Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) with its history of sponsoring the Taliban? And what do you make of the situation in the Swat Valley where control has largely been ceded to pro-Taliban forces?

TA: The ISI is totally under the control of the military, I think. They have a few toxic assets in the shape of some paramilitaries who are out of control.

The Afghanistan war has radicalized the insurgent elements in the Swat Valley. They cross the Afghan border at will. It's always been an artificial border set up by the British, who never really tried to control it — if you were wearing Pashtun tribal clothes you could cross without showing a passport. Only under the Russians did the border begin to be taken more seriously.

A lot will depend on what happens in Afghanistan. If the Pakistani military is forced to participate, there's a serious danger that the military will split.

As for the nuclear weapons, those are under the control of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency. Some people say that there's even a U.S. mechanism in place that can immobilize the weapons if there's any threat of their being used, although there's no confirmation of that. It's not discussed openly, but we understand that this guarantee has been made to Israel. Whether the Pakistani military has secreted nuclear-armed missiles in some secret facility, unknown to anyone, no one knows...

All this is aside from the issue of Kashmir. That is another story, a long one.

P.S.

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