

Pakistan on the Brink? The Real Threat from Within

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THE AMERICAN ANTIWAR movement must understand that what is unfolding in Pakistan bears no resemblance to the “failed-state” proclamations of establishment hacks the world over. The danger is not at all that the country will fall to the Pakistani Taliban, drowned in a tidal wave of instability said to be cascading eastwards from Afghanistan. While sham elections in Afghanistan have hopefully helped clarify the venal, corrupt character of NATO’s efforts there, at times an unhealthy haziness still afflicts the Left’s thinking on Pakistan.

As we approach the end of Obama’s first year in office, “Af-Pak” is prominent among the issues at the forefront of America’s political consciousness. For the first time since he took power, the President’s approval rating has dipped below 50% — due largely to the far-reaching crises in the economy, of course, but certainly also partly due to his very vocal commitment to a war that has become increasingly unpopular with the American people. [1] As antiwar activists seek to rebuild in the shadow of this impending surge, clarity over key issues is critical.

The principal danger, for Pakistan and its people, is that the logic of the Long War promises to cement the effective power of autocratic institutions over its political life, which in turn threatens to suck the oxygen out of popular, democratic movements in the country. With Obama’s Afghanistan “surge,” the real fear is that the establishment, embraced by anxious American patrons, will be able to roll back the fragile gains so recently won through the progressive struggles of its people.

Only six months ago, in fact, Pakistan was celebrating the reinstatement of its deposed Chief Justice, Iftikhar Chaudhry, after a brave display of mass resistance by thousands of Pakistanis. His restoration marked the culmination of the Lawyers’ Movement, a two-year democratic struggle in response to the former military ruler Pervez Musharraf’s first attempt to suspend an increasingly activist Chaudhry in early 2007.

Tellingly, much of this tension had revolved around the Chief Justice’s insistence on investigating the cases of persons “disappeared” by the security establishment.

This struggle, which led through twists and turns to the downfall of the dictatorship, democratic elections in February 2008 and Musharraf’s eventual ouster six months later, was anti-military through-and-through. After almost 10 years of Musharraf’s self-advertised “enlightened moderation,” ably supported by much of the liberal elite (especially in its early years), Pakistan’s people had delivered a resounding rejection of military rule.

The Military and the U.S. War

It is these hard-won gains, and more, that heightened American involvement in the region promises to unravel. Though much is made of the Obama administration's public commitment to the democratic process in Pakistan, in reality the alliance between the current Pakistani administration and its imperial masters flourishes only insofar as the former has willingly expanded the War on Terror within its borders.

Not only has Obama escalated CIA-orchestrated drone attacks in Pakistan's north-west (now responsible for hundreds of civilian deaths, with a target-to-collateral damage ratio of 2%), [2] but — perhaps more importantly — he has funded, overseen and applauded the expansion of the Pakistan State's own War on Terror.

In the past 14 months the government has waged three major offensives, in Bajaur (August 2008 to February 2009), Swat (April to June 2009), and South Waziristan (October 2009 to present), complemented by many minor operations, often still ongoing, in surrounding areas.

In what became the largest internal displacement crisis in Pakistan's history, during the Swat offensive this summer, as many as three million people were forced from their homes — of whom today more than a million remain displaced, many trapped in the hellish netherworld of underfunded refugee camps. [3]

The Pakistani media, which were rightly lauded for their willingness to challenge the establishment on the issue of the Chief Justice's restoration, have largely surrendered to the army's mandated moratorium on coverage from the war zones. The scattered narratives that have emerged, though, from refugees and the odd independent report, paint, as one might expect, a horrifying picture. [4]

In the tradition of guerrilla fighters before them, more often than not militants succeed in fleeing once open fighting breaks out, leaving others to bear the brunt of the offensive. (This last fact confirms, also, the general futility of any military solution — for example, despite having declared a widely trumpeted success in Bajaur in February after a pitched six-month campaign, [5] in recent months the military has been forced to re-open operations in the area.). [6]

In short, far from sidelining the Pakistani army, Obama's commitment to regional escalation has ensured that the men in khaki remain unabashedly central to Pakistan's political life. Certainly, American pressure on the increasingly unpopular Zardari government has shed light on cracks within the Pakistani establishment. In the brouhaha caused by the perceived arrogance of the recent Kerry-Lugar Bill (which attached conditions on U.S. aid, demanding a crackdown on certain Islamist factions — ed.) the main opposition force in parliament, Nawaz Sharif's PML-N, took the side of the army against the governing PPP.

But while it makes sense to track these potential tensions at the center, it is still the case that none of the main political forces possess a principled platform of opposition to coordinated military escalation. In short, the Pakistani army, thanks in no small part to its red-white-and-blue benefactors, is back in business.

This strategic pattern, it bears mentioning, is in line with the history of American policy towards the country. The United States has consistently backed the forces of reaction to the hilt. Not long after independence, Pakistan became a ready imperial satrap, joining the South East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954, and signing the anti-Nasserite Baghdad Pact a year later.

This alliance was forged by a government deeply alienated from its people. The curious, tragic fallout of Partition in the subcontinent was that the Pakistan movement (and the political party that led it, the Muslim League) lacked substantive legitimacy in precisely those provinces that came to

comprise Pakistan in 1947. For this reason, as Ayesha Jalal has argued, the civil bureaucracy and the military came to dominate what became an increasingly centralized political infrastructure. [7]

This unwillingness of the ruling elites to cede authority to the political process and the provinces is a partial explanation for the fact that, for roughly half of its history, Pakistan has been ruled by its army.

Again, today, dynamics that recall these origins are in evidence. Under Musharraf the Pakistani military had been engaged, on and off, in operations in and around the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) since 2002. Moreover, as mentioned, despite the restoration of democratic rule in 2008, the battle has been escalated considerably in recent years — the State has waged expanded, merciless counter-insurgency campaigns in the border region.

As reward, some 70% of the \$15.4 billion of U.S. aid that Pakistan has received over the past seven years has gone towards security-related expenditure. [8] In turn, of course, between 2005 and 2008 Pakistan bought a whopping \$4.5 billion of American military hardware. [9]

Perhaps most damningly, in 2009, in addition to the half that went towards the Pakistani military, a little less than one-third of the American “aid” flowing into Pakistan was earmarked for the massive upgrading and re-construction of the U.S. embassy and consulates in the country. [10]

A War on Terror?

Officially, the civilian government has branded the war as a battle for the country’s survival. However, the widely trafficked narrative of Pakistan as locked in a fight to stave off Taliban rule entirely and strategically distorts the character of the conflict.

There was never any threat that some ten to 20,000 primitively armed guerillas, whose base of support was always in geographically confined rural and mountainous terrain, would be able to conquer the world’s sixth most populous country (and its seventh-largest army, to boot). Rather, to understand the complicated contours of the Pakistani war on terror, one has to pry much, much deeper.

Unfortunately, a not insignificant number of liberal and even left-wing voices within Pakistan have endorsed the recent operations in Swat and South Waziristan, arguing that — this time! — the army has been truly serious about rooting out the threat of misogynist terror. Indeed, even amongst the general population, through an aggressive (and nauseating) propaganda campaign and an effective media blackout, the army has won scattered support for what have been truly brutal military offensives. [11]

Perhaps the best way for the American Left to better understand the complexities of the current crisis in Pakistan, then, is to be attuned to the political bankruptcy of the domestic pro-war position (the ethical bankruptcy I will treat as a given). Three failings, in particular, come to mind.

First, ever since the years of the Zia ul-Haq dictatorship of the 1980s (strongly backed by the U.S. Reagan administration as a “bulwark against Communism” — ed.), the Pakistani military has been integral to (and not simply complicit in) the networks of patronage that have built the ideological and material infrastructure for militant fundamentalism in the region.

After the rabidly reactionary Gulbuddin Hekmatyar failed in taking power in Afghanistan after the fall of Najibullah’s government in 1992, the Pakistani establishment sponsored Mullah Omar and the Taliban, who found themselves in control of much of a war-ravaged Afghanistan by 1996. In the

calculus of the Pakistani military, still determined to ensure a favorable outcome in the event of an American withdrawal, nothing of substance has changed in the intervening years — most intelligence insiders concur that it retains ties to various militant groups across the border. [12]

These Afghan groups and their ideology have forever been seen as potential assets by the Pakistani security establishment; the belief that it has performed an about-face, and now seeks their total eradication, demonstrates shocking political immaturity.

The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP — the “Pakistani Taliban”), of course, are different. They represent a motley alliance of a variety of militant groups, distinct from (and apparently repudiated by) the Taliban in Afghanistan, [13] which came together in December 2007 on one point of unity — to fight the Pakistani state.

Yet here, too, the military is selectively involved. Setting aside, again, the myriad other groups patronized by the Pakistani intelligence agencies in the region and otherwise, in the case of the TTP the military has proactively pursued a “Bad Taliban-Good Taliban” split.

Indeed, the army’s offensive in South Waziristan was preceded by active negotiations to ensure that two prominent Taliban commanders fight on the side of the government (or remain neutral, at the very least) [14] — forces that the U.S. military believes are active supporters of the Afghan Taliban.

A war for the soul of Pakistan, indeed.

Liberals also forget that the military is today engaged in the thoroughgoing repression of a national liberation struggle in the province of Baluchistan.

The current operation, which has by many accounts intensified since Musharraf’s demise, represents the fifth deployment of the army against the Baluchi people since independence.

Predictably, despite the fact that the central government intensively exploits the resources of the province (including, now, a new port constructed with the help of the Chinese), 18 of the 20 most infrastructure-deprived districts in the country are located in Baluchistan. Some 88% of its population lives in “severe deprivation,” compared to only 25% in Punjab. [15]

Second, the Taliban have come to stand in for what is lazily referred to as the “Talibanization” of Pakistani society — the terribly misleading label often deployed to express concern with the general phenomenon of religious bigotry in the country. Raising the specter of “Islamofascism,” westernized elites have denounced the Taliban as the agents of increasing fundamentalism and misogyny in society, dressing the war on terror in the language of feminist and secular liberation.

This position — as in Afghanistan — relinquishes the struggle to some of the country’s most notorious and intolerant political forces (such as the Sindh-based MQM, a quasi-fascist political formation that has preyed on the rhetoric of “Talibanization” in its battles with migrant Pashtuns). It also conflates the Taliban — a series of rural insurgencies confined to select areas in the northwest — with the creeping conservatism of urban and middle-class Pakistan.

These two developments, it must be reiterated, are sociologically entirely distinct. Indeed, tellingly, it is precisely this layer of Pakistani society that has emerged as backers of the State’s offensives against the Taliban. [16] “Winning” the War on Terror, whatever else it might mean, contributes nothing to the struggle to advance secular, tolerant politics.

Indeed, it scarcely needs to be said that the State is wholeheartedly complicit in the opposite — the perpetrators of a recent pogrom against Christians in the Punjabi city of Gojra, for instance, have been left completely and intentionally unpunished by the local establishment. [17]

Lastly, the pro-war position slides over the extent of political oppression and economic

underdevelopment in the country, thus militarizing and outsourcing a struggle that can only be waged politically (dare I say, by the Left). The TTP, after all, has not emerged in a vacuum.

As screeching thinktankers implore the Government to re-establish its writ in the tribal “Wild West,” it bears repeating that, for the average inhabitant of these regions, the benefits of the modern State have been forever absent. For all the talk of militants targeting girls’ schools (which has happened and which is abhorrent, of course), in 1998 the female literacy rate in the region was a shocking 3% (up to 19%, if you include the North-West Frontier Province). [18]

More generally, the Pakistani government has engaged the border region through a legal-political relationship that remains repressive, anti-democratic, and literally colonial. To this day, the Frontier Crimes Regulation Act (1901), one of the British Lord Curzon’s “civilizing” interventions, remains in effect. According to its provisions, supreme judicial authority resides in the autocratic figure of the Political Agent, whose occasional consultations with a jirga of tribal elites more or less constitutes due process. [19]

The penal code that complements this arrangement is shamefully draconian — among other things, it sanctions the punishment of whole tribes for the crimes of an individual member. [20] Last year, under this collective responsibility clause, police in North Waziristan boarded shops owned by members of the Eidek Tribe. Their crime (or, rather, the crime of their fellow tribesmen)? Blocking roads in order to protest the insufficient provision of flour to the region. [21]

Conclusion

At its worst — in Robert Greenwald’s recent antiwar film, “Rethink Afghanistan,” for instance — the confusion over Pakistan portrays an image of the country as a tinderbox of paroxysmal, militant outrage.

Each additional minute of the American occupation of Afghanistan, we hear, heightens the probability that Pakistan will fall to the barbarian hordes gathering at its gates. Setting aside its oddly libertarian and Orientalist affinities (“Withdraw, before they devour themselves in rage!”), this position is analytically and politically nonsensical.

One important task of the American Left, then, is to expose the deeply misleading portrayal of Pakistan as a country slated to fall to the Taliban — even if this contention is intended as an argument against the U.S. war in Afghanistan.

Instead, as I’ve argued, it is critical that we understand the real dimensions of the forces, imperialist and domestic, arrayed against the Pakistani people.

This is not to underplay the importance of the struggle against the forces of fundamentalism; rather, it is the only way in which that struggle itself can be coherently conceived. As I hope I’ve shown, the notion that a colossally corrupt and heavy-handed security apparatus is legitimately interested in the elimination of militancy is grossly misguided.

Indeed I would close by stressing that while the country is certainly fraught with cleavages and contradictions, very few of these can be understood through the prism of religion, in general (or Islam, in particular). For one, owing in part to the effects of the excessively centralized nature of the State, the national question is effectively alive in every corner of the country; in each case, this struggle is overwhelmingly led by secular forces.

More generally — just as anywhere else — it ought to be unsurprising that people in Pakistan are most affected by issues that afflict them in their roles as workers and peasants, first. Decades of

privatizations and austerity measures have compounded a long, sordid legacy of structural underdevelopment. Inordinate food inflation over the past two years (the price of wheat has increased 95% since May 2007) has left the vast majority of the country in a very fragile economic state.

An appalling 85% of the population lives on less than \$2/day. [22] With some 49% of the government's revenue locked up in debt repayments, [23] and the ink fresh on a massive IMF bailout package (repayments start in 2011-2012), further austerity and retrenchment are almost certainly in store. [24]

The task of resisting this will fall to progressive forces in Pakistan. As in other countries, the Left in the country is, certainly, in the grips of a serious crisis. This is not to ignore prominent examples of resistance — peasants in Okara a few years ago waged a famous and successful struggle against the military's occupation of their farms; hundreds of workers affiliated with the Labor Qaumi Movement, in Faisalabad, have been locked in wave after wave of battles against intransigent mill owners in their city; and landless peasants in Sindh only recently shamed one of Pakistan's most notorious feudals into surrendering in a struggle over land that had been running for years.

Certainly efforts in the country, and elsewhere, need redoubling — but when in recent memory has this not been the case? Even if it promises to be a long, dramatic road ahead, the least we can do is play our part.

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P.S.

* From Against The Current, ATC 144, January-February 2010.

Footnotes

[1] "A series of polls have shown the American public becoming increasingly disillusioned with the war in Afghanistan, where more than 800 U.S. soldiers have lost their lives." <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5g63UfwkVeYcYppW1wXgGFrpbZwBg>.

[2] http://www.thenews.com.pk/top_story_detail.asp?Id=21440.

[3] <http://www.unhcr.org/4af40f2f9.html>.

[4] See, for example, http://www.economist.com/world/asia/displaystory.cfm?story_id=14563668. "An estimated 300 to 400 corpses of suspected Taliban have turned up in Swat, dumped on street corners, bridges or outside homes. Last month Pakistani newspapers gave a figure of 251 bodies. Most show signs of severe torture. Some were killed with a single shot to the head, hands tied behind their backs. Often the dead were last seen alive being taken away by soldiers."

[5] <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/n/a/2008/10/23/international/i115454D48.DTL>.

[6] <http://www.thenews.com.pk/updates.asp?id=91977/>

<http://english.aljazeera.net/news/asia/2009/11/20091124835815119.html>.

[7] See Ayesha Jalal, *The State of Martial Rule*, and Hamza Alavi. "Pakistan and Islam: Ethnicity and Ideology." (1988). Chapter 4 (64-111) In Hamza Alavi and Fred Halliday (eds.). *State and Ideology in the Middle East and Pakistan*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

[8] http://www.fas.org/blog/secretcy/2009/08/crs_aid_to_pakistan.html.

[9] <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/world/13+pakistan+ordered+worth+4.5bn+from+us-za-01>.

[10] <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/the-newspaper/front-page/us-congress-approves-1.4bn-for-pakistan-069>.

[11] See <http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/2009/08/2009888238994769.html>.

[12] "But many analysts say Pakistan is acting only against militants which are a threat to itself, like the Pakistani Taliban, while leaving alone those focused on fighting in Afghanistan or on targeting India." <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/pakistan/09-mullah-omar-not-in-pakistan-taliban-commander-says--szh-03>.

[13] "Recently Mullah Omar strongly criticised the Pakistani branch of the Taliban: they should, he said, be fighting Nato, not the Pakistan army." <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n22/tariq-ali/short-cuts>.

[14] See <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/pakistan/18-more-deals-am-01>.

[15] <http://secularpakistan.wordpress.com/2009/11/08/signatures-on-balochistan-statement/>.

[16] See <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20091109/zaidi>.

[17] See <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/pakistan/13+negligence+of+officials+blamed+for+gojra+riots-za-14>.

[18] <http://eyconsol.com/dmo/fata/index.php?link=9>.

[19] See <http://www.fata.gov.pk/subpages/admnssystem.php>.

[20] See <http://www.asil.org/haider-reflection.cfm>.

[21] See <http://www.dawn.com/2008/07/27/nat19.htm>.

[22] http://www.thenews.com.pk/daily_detail.asp?id=203404.

[23] http://www.thenews.com.pk/daily_detail.asp?id=202866.

[24] http://www.thenews.com.pk/top_story_detail.asp?Id=25541.