

Pakistan: Why Swat matters

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IT is 2009. A captive TV audience in metropolitan Pakistan is increasingly occupied by events in the otherwise idyllic Swat Valley where armed militias led by a certain Mullah Fazlullah have established a parallel government. Reports of lashings for 'loose' women and beheadings in public squares are accompanied by warnings that the outfit known as the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is gaining ground across the rest of the Malakand region.

The government of the day announces a [military operation](#) to cut the militants down to size. An estimated 2.5 million people are displaced from their homes, even well-to-do families left to languish in makeshift camps in Mardan and Swabi. Yet more take refuge in the homes of relatives and friends in big cities like Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi. It is years before they are able to return home.

They do so when the Swat Valley is ostensibly 'cleansed' of the scourge of 'terrorism'. But the gory details of what took place in Swat during military operations — and in many other parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa — can only be talked of in hushed tones. It is not until 2018 and the emergence of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) that the taboo of silence is broken, and there is a reckoning with the truth.

It has been four years since that 'Pakhtun Spring'. But today Swat — along with other flashpoint regions of the 'war on terror' like Waziristan — are again grappling with the return of the shadowy force known as the TTP. Everyone knows the official story — the Taliban's re-conquest of Afghanistan has emboldened their brethren in Pakistan, and they are steadily gaining ground. But the unofficial story implicates the state's own security apparatus too.

The people of Swat will not watch history repeat itself.

Lest anyone has forgotten, our then prime minister Imran Khan [greeted the news](#) of the Afghan Taliban retaking Afghanistan in August 2021 with the announcement that the Afghan people had broken the shackles of slavery. There was even celebration within the Pakistani mainstream at the fact that a 'friendly government' had yet again been installed in Kabul.

It should be no surprise, then, that the growing incidence of militancy in Swat is triggering questions about the extent to which dreams of strategic depth continue to animate the establishment, despite the fact that the Taliban government in Kabul is certainly not singing uncritically to Islamabad's tune.

The massive [protest](#) that engulfed Mingora earlier this week confirms that the people of Swat will not stand by idly and watch history repeat itself. It is worth being reminded that there was an organic component to the rise of Fazlullah in the late 2000s; while the establishment and its cynical strategic goals may have shaped the whole debacle, segments of Swat's society were also duped into believing the millenarian claims of 'Mullah Radio'.

Those currently on the streets in Swat are pronouncing clearly that they have no intention of being duped by anyone again, not least of all by those who act in the name of 'national security'. That so

many have come out — not just in Swat but also other parts of KP — rekindles the sensations that not only Pakhtun youth but also progressive forces everywhere felt when the PTM first emerged.

A combination of state repression and internal conflicts ensured that the embryonic collective politics which crystallised around the organisation — in contexts such as Lahore and Karachi alongside the Pakhtun peripheries — was nipped in the bud. It is important for progressives to learn lessons from those experiences so that voices of peace build better on this occasion.

Swat matters, then, both because it is a reminder of the excesses of the ‘war on terror’ and because eruptions of popular protest that challenge both right-wing militancy and the dominant ideology of national security must be nurtured for their most progressive potentialities to come to fruition.

Swat, Waziristan and other parts of the Pakhtun periphery are very much like Baloch, Gilgit-Baltistani, Sindhi and Seraiki peripheries whose natural resources are also subject to violent grabs by the nexus of capital and state — this summer’s floods made clear just how intertwined our fates are. Indeed, the material exploitation of the ethnic peripheries can be linked to the struggle of progressive intellectuals and toiling classes in metropolitan Pakistan. This was the combination of social forces that was at its most united between the 1950s and 1970s and thereby offered the most potent alternative to class, state and imperialist power that this country has ever experienced.

To bring these forces together again in contemporary Pakistan is no mean feat, not least of all because forces of division and hate are currently more powerful than progressives. But Swat’s people show us that, to borrow from the Italian thinker-revolutionary Antonio Gramsci, pessimism of the intellect can be offset by optimism of the will.

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