

Pakistan at Sixty

Thursday 15 November 2007, by [ALI Tariq](#) (Date first published: 4 October 2007).

Pakistan is best avoided in August, when the rains come and transform the plains into a huge steam bath. When I lived there we fled to the mountains, but this year I stayed put. The real killer is the humidity. Relief arrives in short bursts: a sudden stillness followed by the darkening of the sky, thunderclaps like distant bombs and then the hard rain. Rivers and tributaries quickly overflow; flash floods make cities impassable. Sewage runs through slums and posh neighbourhoods alike.

Even if you go straight from air-conditioned room to air-conditioned car you can't completely escape the smell. In August sixty years ago, Pakistan was separated from the subcontinent. This summer, as power appeared to be draining away from Pervez Musharraf, the country's fourth military dictator, it was instructive to observe the process at first hand.

Disillusionment and resentment are widespread. Cultivating anti-Indian/anti-Hindu feeling, in an attempt to encourage national cohesion, no longer works. The celebrations marking the anniversary of independence on 14 August are more artificial and irritating than ever.

A cacophony of meaningless slogans that impress nobody, countless clichés in newspaper supplements competing for space with stale photographs of the Founder (Muhammad Ali Jinnah) and the Poet (Iqbal). Banal panel discussions remind us of what Jinnah said or didn't say. The perfidious Lord Mountbatten and his 'promiscuous' wife, Edwina, are denounced for favouring India when it came to the division of the spoils.

It's true, but we can't blame them for the wreck Pakistan has become. In private, of course, there is much soul-searching, and a surprising collection of people now feel the state should never have been founded.

Several years after the split with Bangladesh in 1971 I wrote a book called *Can Pakistan Survive?* for Penguin. It was publicly denounced and banned by the dictator of the day, General Zia-ul-Haq, but pirated in many editions. I had argued that if the state carried on in the same old way, some of the minority provinces left behind might also defect, leaving the Punjab alone, strutting like a cock on a dunghill. Many of those who denounced me as a traitor and a renegade are now asking the same question. It's too late for regrets, I tell them. The country is here to stay. And it's not religion or the mystical 'ideology of Pakistan' that guarantees its survival, but its nuclear capacity and Washington.

On the country's 60th birthday (as on its 20th and 30th anniversaries), an embattled military regime is fighting for its survival. There is a war on its western frontier, while at home it is being tormented by jihadis and judges. None of this seemed to make much difference to the young men on motorbikes who took over the streets of Lahore in their annual suicide race. It seems the only thing worth celebrating is the right to die.

Only five managed it this year, a much lower figure than in the previous five years. Maybe this is a rational way to mark a conflict in which more than a million people hacked each other to death as the decaying British Empire prepared to scuttle off home. On the eve of Partition a cabinet meeting in London was devoted to the growing crisis in India. The minutes reported: 'Mr Jinnah was very bitter and determined. He seemed to the secretary of state like a man who knew that he was going

to be killed and therefore insisted on committing suicide to avoid it.' He was not alone.

Now yet another uniformed despot was taking the salute at a military parade to mark independence day in Islamabad, mouthing a bad speech written by a bored bureaucrat that failed to stifle the yawns of the surrounding sycophants. Even the F-16s in proud formation failed to excite the audience. Flags were waved by schoolchildren, a band played the national anthem, the whole show was broadcast live and then it was over.

The European and North American papers give the impression that the main, if not the only, problem confronting Pakistan is the power of the bearded fanatics skulking in the Hindu Kush, who as the papers see it are on the verge of taking over the country. In this account, all that stops a jihadi finger finding the nuclear trigger is Musharraf. Alas, it now seems he might drown in a sea of troubles and so the helpful State Department has pushed out an over-inflated raft in the shape of Benazir Bhutto.

In fact, the threat of a jihadi takeover of Pakistan is remote. There is no possibility of a takeover by religious extremists unless the army wants one, as in the 1980s, when General Zia-ul-Haq handed over the Ministries of Education and Information to the Jamaat-e-Islami, with dire results. There are serious problems confronting Pakistan, but these are usually ignored in Washington, by both the administration and the financial institutions. The lack of a basic social infrastructure encourages hopelessness and despair, but only a tiny minority turns to jihad.

During periods of military rule in Pakistan three groups get together: military leaders, a corrupt clique of fixer-politicians, and businessmen eyeing juicy contracts or state-owned land. The country's ruling elite has spent the last sixty years defending its ill-gotten wealth and privilege, and the Supreme Leader (uniformed or not) is invariably intoxicated by their flattery. Corruption envelops Pakistan. The poor bear the burden, but the middle classes are also affected. Lawyers, doctors, teachers, small businessmen, traders are crippled by a system in which patronage and bribery are trump cards. Some escape – there are 20,000 Pakistani doctors working in the United States alone – but others come to terms with the system, accept compromises that make them deeply cynical about themselves and everyone else.

The resulting moral vacuum is filled by porn films and religiosity of various sorts. In some areas religion and pornography go together: the highest sales of porn videos are in Peshawar and Quetta, strongholds of the religious parties. Taliban leaders in Pakistan target video shops, but the dealers merely go underground. Nor should it be imagined that the bulk of the porn comes from the West. There is a thriving clandestine industry in Pakistan, with its own local stars, male and female.

Meanwhile the Islamists are busy picking up supporters. The persistent and ruthless missionaries of Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) are especially effective. Sinners from every social group, desperate for purification, queue to join. TJ headquarters in Pakistan are situated in a large mission in Raiwind. Once a tiny village surrounded by fields of wheat, corn and mustard seed, it is now a fashionable suburb of Lahore, where the Sharif brothers built a Gulf-style palace when they were in power in the 1990s.

The TJ was founded in the 1920s by Maulana Ilyas, a cleric who trained at the orthodox Sunni seminary in Deoband, in Uttar Pradesh. At first, its missionaries were concentrated in Northern India, but today there are large groups in North America and Western Europe. The TJ hopes to get planning permission to build a mosque in East London next to the Olympic site. It would be the largest mosque in Europe. In Pakistan, TJ influence is widespread. Penetrating the national cricket team has been its most conspicuous success: Inzamam-ul-Haq and Mohammed Yousuf are activists for the cause at home while Mushtaq Ahmet works hard in their interest in Britain. Another triumph

was the post-9/11 recruitment of Junaid Jamshed, the charismatic lead singer of Pakistan's first successful pop group, Vital Signs. He renounced his past and now sings only devotional songs – naats.

The Tablighis stress their non-violence and insist they are there merely to broadcast the true faith in order to help people find the correct path in life. This may be so, but it is clear that some younger male recruits, bored with all the dogma, ceremonies and ritual, are more interested in getting their hands on a Kalashnikov. Many believe that the Tablighi missionary camps are fertile recruiting grounds for armed groups active on the Western Frontier and in Kashmir.

The establishment has been slow to challenge the interpretation of Islam put forward by groups such as Tablighi. Musharraf advised people to go and see *Khuda Kay Liye* ('In the Name of God'), a new movie directed by Shoaib Mansoor (who wrote and produced some of *Vital Signs*' most successful music). This may not help the film, or the moderate Islam it favours, given that Musharraf's popularity ratings currently trail Osama bin Laden's, according to a recent poll, but I went to a matinee performance in Lahore and the cinema was packed with young people.

The film is well intentioned, also long-winded and crude. It has, however, had an impact. At least it tries out a few ideas, which is unheard of in a country where the film industry produces nothing but Bollywood-style dross, even if the ideas are limited to the good Muslim, bad Muslim stereotype. Jihadi violence is bad. Music is good and not anti-Islamic. Violence and rape in the badlands of the Pakistan-Afghan frontier are intercut with scenes in a post-9/11 United States, where an innocent Pakistani musician is lifted by intelligence operatives and tortured (these scenes go on far too long). The implication is that each side feeds on the other.

It is a prim film and the row of youths sitting behind me clearly wanted some more action on the sex front. When a white female student in Chicago gives the Pakistani musician a present, one of them commented: 'She's giving him her phone number.' If the ushers hadn't told the youths to keep quiet I might have enjoyed the film more.

One of the main threats to Musharraf's authority is the country's judiciary. On 9 March, Musharraf suspended Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, the chief justice of the Supreme Court, pending an investigation. The accusations against him were contained in a letter from Naeem Bokhari, a Supreme Court advocate. Curiously, the letter was widely circulated – I received a copy via email. I wondered whether something was afoot, but decided the letter was just sour grapes. Not so: it was part of a plan. After a few personal complaints, extravagant rhetoric took over:

My Lord, the dignity of lawyers is consistently being violated by you. We are treated harshly, rudely, brusquely and nastily. We are not heard. We are not allowed to present our case. There is little scope for advocacy. The words used in the Bar Room for Court No. 1 are 'the slaughter house'. We are cowed down by aggression from the Bench, led by you. All we receive from you is arrogance, aggression and belligerence.

The following passage should have alerted me to what was really going on:

I am pained at the wide publicity to cases taken up by My Lord in the Supreme Court under the banner of Fundamental Rights. The proceedings before the Supreme Court can conveniently and easily be referred to the District and Sessions Judges. I am further pained by the media coverage of the Supreme Court on the recovery of a female. In the Bar Room, this is referred to as a 'media circus'.

The chief justice was beginning to embarrass the regime. He had found against the government on a

number of key issues, including the rushed privatisation of the Pakistan Steel Mills in Karachi, a pet project of Prime Minister Shaukat ('Shortcut') Aziz.

The case was reminiscent of Yeltsin's Russia. Economists had estimated that the industry was worth \$5 billion. Seventy-five per cent of the shares were sold for \$362 million in a 30-minute auction to a friendly consortium consisting of Arif Habib Securities (Pakistan), al-Tuwairqi (Saudi Arabia) and the Magnitogorsk Iron & Steel Works Open JSC (Russia). The privatisation wasn't popular with the military, and the retiring chairman, Haq Nawaz Akhtar, complained that 'the plant could have fetched more money if it were sold as scrap.'

The general perception was that the president and prime minister had helped out their friends. A frequenter of the Stock Exchange told me in Karachi that Arif Habib Securities (which owns 20 per cent) was set up as a front company for Shaukat Aziz. The Saudi steel giant (40 per cent) is reputedly on very friendly terms with Musharraf, who turned up to open a steel factory set up by the group on 220 acres of land rented from the adjoining Pakistan Steel Mills. Now they own it all.

After the Supreme Court insisted that 'disappeared' political activists be produced in court and refused to dismiss rape cases, there were worries in Islamabad that the chief justice might even declare the military presidency unconstitutional. Paranoia set in. Measures had to be taken. The general and his cabinet decided to frighten Chaudhry by suspending him. The chief justice was kept in solitary confinement for several hours, manhandled by intelligence operatives, and traduced on state television.

But instead of caving in and accepting a generous resignation settlement, the judge insisted on defending himself, triggering a remarkable movement in defence of an independent judiciary. This is surprising. Pakistani judges are notoriously conservative and have legitimised every coup with a bogus 'doctrine of necessity' ruling (although some did refuse to swear an oath of loyalty to Musharraf).

When I visited Pakistan in April the protests were getting bigger every day. Initially confined to the country's 80,000 lawyers and several dozen judges, unrest soon spread beyond them, which was unusual in a country whose people have become increasingly alienated from elite rule. But the lawyers were marching in defence of the constitutional separation of powers. There was something delightfully old-fashioned about this struggle: it involved neither money nor religion, but principle.

Careerists from the opposition (some of whom had organised thuggish assaults on the Supreme Court when in power) tried to make the cause their own. 'Don't imagine they've all suddenly changed,' Abid Hasan Manto, one of the country's most respected lawyers, told me. 'On the other hand, when the time comes almost anything can act as a spark.'

It soon became obvious to most people in the Islamabad bureaucracy that they had made a gigantic blunder. But as often happens in a crisis, instead of acknowledging this and moving to correct it, the perpetrators decided on a show of strength.

The first targets were independent TV channels. In Karachi and other cities in the south three channels suddenly went dark as they were screening reports on the demonstrations. There was popular outrage. On 5 May Chaudhry drove from Islamabad to give a speech in Lahore, stopping at every town en route to meet supporters; it took 26 hours to complete a journey that should take four or five. In Islamabad they plotted a counter-strike.

The judge was due to visit Karachi, the country's largest city, on 12 May. Political power here rests in the hands of the MQM (Muttahida Qaumi Movement/United National Movement), an unsavoury

outfit created during a previous dictatorship and notorious for its involvement in protection rackets and other kinds of violence. It has supported Musharraf loyally through every crisis. Its leader, Altaf Hussain, guides the movement from a safe perch in London, fearful of retribution from his many opponents were he to return.

In a video address to his followers in Karachi he said: 'If conspiracies are hatched to end the present democratically elected government then each and every worker of MQM . . . will stand firm and defend the democratic government.' It was typical of him. On Islamabad's instructions, the MQM leaders decided to prevent the judge addressing the meeting in Karachi. He was not allowed to leave the airport. His supporters in different parts of the city were assaulted. Almost fifty people were killed. After footage of the violence was screened on Aaj TV, the station was attacked by armed MQM volunteers, who shot at the building for six whole hours and set cars in the parking lot on fire.

The management of the TV station mysteriously failed to reach senior police officers, the chief minister or the governor. People understood why, and a successful general strike followed, which further isolated the regime. A devastating report, *Carnage in Karachi*, published in August by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, confirmed in great detail what everyone already knew: the police and army had been ordered to stand by while armed MQM members went on the rampage.

Musharraf, trying desperately to keep a grip on the country, had no alternative but to sound the retreat. The chief justice's appeal against his suspension was finally admitted and heard by the Supreme Court. On 20 July a unanimous decision was made to reinstate him, and shamefaced government lawyers were seen leaving the precinct in a hurry. A reinvigorated court got down to business. Hafiz Abdul Basit was a 'disappeared' prisoner accused of terrorism.

The chief justice summoned Tariq Pervez, the director-general of Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency, and asked him politely where the prisoner was being kept. Pervez replied that he had no idea and had never heard of Basit. The chief justice instructed the police chief to produce Basit in court within 48 hours: 'Either produce the detainee or get ready to go to jail.' Two days later Basit was produced and then released, after the police failed to present any substantial evidence against him. Washington and London were not happy. They were convinced that Basit was a terrorist who should have been kept in prison indefinitely, as he certainly would have been in Britain or the US.

The Supreme Court is currently considering six petitions challenging Musharraf's decision to contest the presidency without relinquishing his command of the army. There is much nervousness in Islamabad. The president's supporters are threatening dire consequences if the court rules against him. But to declare a state of emergency would require the support of the army, and I was told that informal soundings had revealed a reluctance to intervene on the part of the generals. Their polite excuse was that they were too heavily committed to the 'war on terror' to be able to preserve law and order in the cities.

As the judicial crisis temporarily ended, a more sombre one loomed. Most of today's jihadi groups are the mongrel offspring of Pakistani and Western intelligence outfits, born in the 1980s when General Zia was in power and waging the West's war against the godless Russians, who were then occupying Afghanistan. That is when state patronage of Islamist groups began. One cleric who benefited was Maulana Abdullah, who was allotted land to build a madrassa in the heart of Islamabad, not far from the government buildings. Soon the area was increased so that two separate facilities (for male and female students) could be constructed, together with an enlarged Lal Masjid, or Red Mosque. State money was provided for all this, and the government is the technical owner of the property.

During the 1980s and 1990s this complex became a transit camp for young jihadis on their way to

fight in Afghanistan and, later, Kashmir. Abdullah made no secret of his beliefs. He was sympathetic to the Saudi-Wahhabi interpretation of Islam and during the Iraq-Iran war was only too happy to encourage the killing of Shia 'heretics' in Pakistan. It was his patronage of ultra-sectarian, anti-Shia terror groups that led to his assassination in October 1998. Members of a rival Muslim faction killed him soon after he had finished praying in his own mosque.

His sons, Abdul Rashid Ghazi and Abdul Aziz, then took control of the mosque and religious schools. The government agreed that Aziz would lead the Friday congregation and preach the weekly sermon after Friday prayers. His sermons were often supportive of al-Qaida, though he was more careful about his language after 9/11. Senior civil servants and military officers often attended Friday prayers. The better-educated and soft-spoken Rashid, with his lean, haggard face and ragged beard, was left to act as spin-doctor. He was wheeled on to charm visiting foreign or local journalists, and did it well.

But after November 2004, when the army, under heavy US pressure, launched an offensive in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, relations between the brothers and the government became tense. Aziz in particular was livid. He might not have done anything about it, but, according to Rashid, 'a retired colonel of the Pakistan Army approached us with a written request for a fatwa clarifying the Sharia perspective on the army waging a war on the tribal people.'

Aziz did not waste any time. He issued a fatwa declaring that the killing of its own people by a Muslim army is haram ('forbidden'), 'that any army official killed during the operation should not be given a Muslim burial' and that 'the militants who die while fighting the Pakistan Army are martyrs.' Within days of its publication the fatwa had been publicly endorsed by almost five hundred 'religious scholars'. Despite heavy pressure from the mosque's patrons in the ISI, Pakistan's military intelligence, the brothers refused to withdraw the fatwa. The government response was surprisingly muted. Aziz's official status as the mosque's imam was ended and an arrest warrant issued against him, but it was never served and the brothers were allowed to carry on as usual. Perhaps the ISI thought they might still prove useful.

Earlier that year the government claimed it had uncovered a terrorist plot to bomb military installations, including the GHQ and other state buildings, on 14 August. Machine-guns and explosives were found in Abdul Rashid Ghazi's car. New warrants were issued against the brothers and they were arrested. At this point, the religious affairs minister, Ijaz-ul-Haq, General Zia's son, persuaded his colleagues to pardon the clerics in return for a written apology pledging that they wouldn't become involved in the armed struggle. Rashid claimed the whole plot had been scripted to please the West and in a newspaper article asked the religious affairs minister to provide proof that he had given the undertaking the minister had supposedly asked for. There was no response.

In January this year, the brothers decided to shift their focus from foreign to domestic policy and demanded an immediate implementation of Sharia law. Until then they had been content to denounce US policies in the Muslim world and America's local point-man Musharraf for helping dismantle the Taliban government in Afghanistan. They did not publicly support the three attempts made on Musharraf's life, but it was hardly a secret that they regretted his survival.

The statement they issued in January was intended as an open provocation to the regime. Aziz spelled out his programme: 'We will never permit dance and music in Pakistan. All those interested in such activities should shift to India. We are tired of waiting. It is Sharia or martyrdom.' They felt threatened by the government's demolition of two mosques that had been built illegally on public land. When they received notices announcing the demolition of parts of the Red Mosque and the women's seminary the brothers dispatched dozens of women students in black burqas to occupy a children's library next to their seminary. The intelligence agencies appeared to be taken aback, but

quickly negotiated an end to the occupation.

The brothers continued to test the authorities. Sharia was implemented and there was a public bonfire of books, CDs and DVDs. Then the women from the madrassa directed their fire against Islamabad's up-market brothels, targeting Auntie Shamim, a well-known procuress who provided 'decent' girls for indecent purposes, and whose clients included the local great and good (a number of them moderate religious leaders). Auntie ran the brothel like an office: she kept office hours and shut up shop at midday on Friday so that clients could go to the nearest mosque, which happened to be the Lal Masjid. The morality brigades raided the brothel and 'freed' the women. Most of the girls were educated, some were single parents, others were widows, all were desperately short of funds. The office hours suited them. Auntie Shamim fled town, and her workers sought similar employment elsewhere, while the madrassa girls celebrated an easy victory.

Emboldened by their triumph, they decided to take on Islamabad's posh massage parlours, not all of which were sex joints, and some of which were staffed by Chinese citizens. Six Chinese women were abducted in late June and taken to the mosque. The Chinese ambassador was not pleased. He informed President Hu Jintao, who was even less pleased, and Beijing made it clear that it wanted its citizens freed without delay. Government fixers arrived at the mosque to plead the strategic importance of Sino-Pakistan relations, and the women were released. The massage industry promised that henceforth only men would massage other men. Honour was satisfied, even though the deal directly contradicted the message of the Koran. The liberal press depicted the anti-vice campaign as the Talibanisation of Pakistan, which annoyed the Lal Masjid clerics. 'Rudy Giuliani, when he became mayor of New York, closed the brothels,' Rashid said. 'Was that also Talibanisation?'

Angered and embarrassed by the kidnapping of the Chinese women, Musharraf demanded a solution. The Saudi ambassador to Pakistan, Ali Saeed al-Awad Asseri, arrived at the mosque and spent ninety minutes with the brothers. They were welcoming but told him all they wanted was the implementation of Saudi laws in Pakistan. Surely he agreed? The ambassador declined to meet the press after the visit, so his response remains unrecorded. His mediation a failure, Plan B was set in motion.

On 3 July, the paramilitary Rangers began to lay barbed wire at the end of the street in front of the mosque. Some madrassa students opened fire, shot a Ranger dead, and for good measure torched the neighbouring Environment Ministry. Security forces responded the same night with tear gas and machine-guns. The next morning the government declared a curfew in the area and the week-long siege of the mosque began, with television networks beaming images across the world. Rashid must have been pleased. The brothers thought that keeping women and children hostage inside the compound might save them. But some were released and Aziz was arrested as he tried to escape in a burqa.

On 10 July, paratroopers finally stormed the complex. Abdul Rashid Ghazi and at least a hundred others died in the ensuing clashes. Eleven soldiers were also killed and more than forty wounded. Several police stations were attacked and there were ominous complaints from the Tribal Areas. Maulana Faqir Mohammed, a leading Taliban supporter, told thousands of armed tribesmen: 'We beg Allah to destroy Musharraf and we will seek revenge for the Lal Masjid atrocities.' This view was reiterated by Osama bin Laden, who declared Musharraf an 'infidel' and said that 'removing him is now obligatory.'

I was in Karachi in the last week of August, when suicide bombers hit military targets, among them a bus carrying ISI employees, to avenge Rashid's death. In the country as a whole the reaction was muted. The leaders of the MMA, a coalition of religious parties that governs the Frontier province

and shares power in Baluchistan, made ugly public statements, but took no action.

Only a thousand people marched in the demonstration called in Peshawar the day after the deaths. This was the largest protest march, and even here the mood was subdued. There was no shrill glorification of the martyrs. The contrast with the campaign to reinstate the chief justice could not have been more pronounced. Three weeks later, more than 100,000 people gathered in the Punjabi city of Kasur to observe the 250th anniversary of the death of the great 17th-century poet Bulleh Shah, one in a distinguished line of Sufi poets who denounced organised religion and orthodoxy. For him a mullah could be compared to a barking dog or a crowing cock.

The fact is that jihadis are not popular in most of Pakistan, but neither is the government. The Red Mosque episode raised too many unanswered questions. Why did the government not act in January? How did the clerics manage to accumulate such a large store of weapons without the knowledge of the government? Was the ISI aware that an arsenal was concealed inside the mosque? If so, why did they keep quiet? What was the relationship between the clerics and government agencies? Why was Aziz released and allowed to return to his village without being charged? Has the state decided to relinquish its monopoly of violence?

A lot of this has to do with Afghanistan. The failure of the Nato occupation has revived the Taliban as well as the trade in heroin and has destabilised north-western Pakistan. Indiscriminate bombing raids by US planes have killed too many innocent civilians, and the culture of revenge remains strong in the region. The corruption and cronyism of the Karzai government have alienated many Afghans, who welcomed the toppling of Mullah Omar and hoped for better times. Instead, they have witnessed land-grabs and the construction of luxury villas by Karzai's colleagues. And there are persistent rumours that Karzai's younger brother, Ahmad Wali Karzai, has become one of the biggest drug barons in the country.

The Pashtun tribes have never recognised the Durand Line, the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan imposed by the British. And so when guerrillas flee to the tribal areas under Pakistani control they are not handed over to Islamabad, but fed and clothed till they go back to Afghanistan or are protected like the al-Qaida leaders. Washington feels that Musharraf's deals with tribal elders border on capitulation to the Taliban and is angry because Pakistani military actions are paid for by the US and they feel they aren't getting value for money. This is not to mention the \$10 billion Pakistan has received since 9/11 for signing up to the 'war on terror'.

The problem is that some elements in Pakistani military intelligence feel that they will be able to take Afghanistan back once Operation Enduring Freedom has come to an end. For this reason they refuse to give up their links with the guerrilla leaders. They even think that the US might one day favour such a policy. I doubt whether this could happen: Iranian influence is strong in Herat and western Afghanistan; the Northern Alliance receives weapons from Russia and India is the major regional power. A stable settlement will have to include a regional guarantee of Afghan stability and the formation of a national government after Nato withdrawal.

Even if Washington accepted a cleaned-up version of the Taliban, the other countries involved would not, and a new set of civil conflicts could only lead to disintegration. Were this to happen, the Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand Line might opt to create their own state. It sounds far-fetched today, but what if the confederation of tribes that is Afghanistan were to split up into statelets, each under the protection of a larger power?

Back in the heart of Pakistan the most difficult and explosive issue remains social and economic inequality. This is not unrelated to the increase in the number of madrassas. If there were a half-decent state education system, poor families might not feel the need to hand over a son or daughter

to the clerics in the hope that at least one child will be clothed, fed and educated. Were there even the semblance of a health system many would be saved from illnesses contracted as a result of fatigue and poverty. No government since 1947 has done much to reduce inequality.

The notion that the soon-to-return Benazir Bhutto, perched on Musharraf's shoulder, equals progress is as risible as Nawaz Sharif imagining that millions of people would turn out to receive him when he arrived at Islamabad airport last month. A general election is due later this year. If it is as comprehensively rigged as the last one was, the result will be increased alienation from the political process. The outlook is bleak. There is no serious political alternative to military rule.

I spent my last day in Karachi with fishermen in a village near Korangi creek. Shortcut Aziz has signed away the mangroves where shellfish and lobsters flourish, and land is being reclaimed to build Diamond City, Sugar City and other monstrosities on the Gulf model. The fishermen have been campaigning against these encroachments, but with little success.

'We need a tsunami,' one of them half-joked. We talked about their living conditions. 'All we dream of is schools for our children, medicines and clinics in our villages, clean water and electricity in our homes,' one woman said. 'Is that too much to ask for?' Nobody even mentioned religion.

P.S.

* London Review of Books:

http://www.lrb.co.uk/v29/n19/ali_01_.html

* Tariq Ali's *The Duel: Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power* will be published next year.