

Pakistan on the Brink

By Ahmed Rashid

To get to President Asif Ali Zardari's presidential palace in the heart of Islamabad for dinner is like running an obstacle course. Pakistan's once sleepy capital, full of restaurant-going bureaucrats and diplomats, is now littered with concrete barriers, blast walls, checkpoints, armed police, and soldiers; as a result of recent suicide bombings the city now resembles Baghdad or Kabul. At the first checkpoint, two miles from the palace, they have my name and my car's license number. There are seven more checkpoints to negotiate along the way.

Apart from traveling to the airport by helicopter to take trips abroad, the President stays inside the palace; he fears threats to his life by the Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda, who in December 2007 killed his wife, the charismatic Benazir Bhutto, then perhaps the country's only genuine national leader. Zardari's isolation has only added to his growing unpopularity, his indecisiveness, and the public feeling that he is out of touch. Even as most Pakistanis have concluded that the Taliban now pose the greatest threat to the Pakistani state since its creation, the president, the prime minister, and the army chief have, until recently, been in a state of denial of reality.

"We are not a failed state yet but we may become one in ten years if we don't receive international support to combat the Taliban threat," Zardari indignantly says, pointing out that in contrast to the more than \$11 billion former president Pervez Musharraf received from the US in the years after the September 11 attacks, his own administration has received only between "\$10 and \$15 million," despite all the new American promises of aid. He objects to the charge that his government has no plan to counter the Taliban-led insurgency that since the middle of April has spread to within sixty miles of the capital. "We have many plans including dealing with the 18,000 madrasas"—i.e., the Muslim religious schools—"that are brainwashing our youth, but we have no money to arm the police or fund development, give jobs or revive the economy. What are we supposed to do?" Zardari's complaints are true, but he does acknowledge that additional foreign money would have to be linked to a plan of action, which does not exist.

The sense of unrealism is widespread. As the Taliban stormed south from their mountain bases near the Afghan border in northern Pakistan in late April, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani told the parliament that they posed no threat and there was nothing to worry about. Interior Minister Rehman Malik talked about how the Afghan government of Hamid Karzai was supporting the Taliban and how India and Russia were sowing more unrest in Pakistan. Meanwhile, the inscrutable, chain-smoking army chief, General Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani, remained silent. By the time Kiyani made his first statement on the advance of the Taliban, on April 24, the army was being widely and loudly criticized for failing to deploy troops in time.

Pakistan is close to the brink, perhaps not to a meltdown of the government, but to a permanent state of anarchy, as the Islamist revolutionaries led by the Taliban and their many allies take more territory, and state power shrinks. There will be no mass revolutionary uprising like in Iran in 1979 or storming of the citadels of power as in Vietnam and Cambodia; rather we can expect a slow, insidious, long-burning fuse of fear, terror, and paralysis that the Taliban have lit and that the state is unable, and partly unwilling, to douse.

In northern Pakistan, where the Taliban and their allies are largely in control, the situation is critical. State institutions are paralyzed, and over one million people have fled their homes. The provincial government of North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) has gone into hiding, and law and order have collapsed, with 180 kidnappings for ransom in the NWFP capital of Peshawar in the first months of this year alone. The overall economy is crashing, with drastic power cuts across the country as industry shuts down. Joblessness and lack of access to schools among the young are widespread, creating a new source of recruits to the Taliban. Zardari and Gilani have spent the past year battling their political rivals instead of facing up to the Taliban threat and the economic crisis.

According to the Islamabad columnist Farrukh Saleem, 11 percent of Pakistan's territory is either directly controlled or contested by the Taliban. Ten percent of Balochistan province, in the southwest of the country, is a no-go area because of another raging insurgency led by Baloch separatists. Karachi, the port city of 17 million people, is an ethnic and sectarian tinderbox waiting to explode. In

the last days of April thirty-six people were killed there in ethnic violence. The Taliban are now penetrating into Punjab, Pakistan's political and economic heartland where the major cities of Islamabad and Lahore are located and where 60 percent of the country's 170 million people live. Fear is gripping the population there.

The Taliban have taken advantage of the vacuum of governance by carrying out spectacular suicide bombings in major cities across the country. They are generating fear, rumor, and also support from countless unemployed youth, some of whom are willing to kill themselves to advance the Taliban cause. The mean age for a suicide bomber is now just sixteen.

American officials are in a concealed state of panic, as I observed during a recent visit to Washington at the time when 17,000 additional troops were being dispatched to Afghanistan. The Obama administration unveiled its new Afghan strategy on March 27, only to discover that Pakistan is the much larger security challenge, while US options there are far more limited. The real US fear was bluntly addressed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Baghdad on April 25:

One of our concerns...is that if the worst, the unthinkable were to happen, and this advancing Taliban...were to essentially topple the government for failure to beat them back, then they would have the keys to the nuclear arsenal of Pakistan.... We can't even contemplate that.

Pakistan has between sixty and one hundred nuclear weapons, and they are mostly housed in western Punjab where the Taliban have made some inroads; but they are under the control of the army, which remains united and disciplined if ineffective against terrorism. In his press conference on April 29, President Obama made statements intended to be reassuring after the specter of Pakistani weakness evoked by Clinton, saying, "I feel confident that that nuclear arsenal will remain out of militant hands."

A week earlier Clinton had accused the Pakistani government of "basically abdicating to the Taliban and to the extremists." Leading US military figures such as General David Petraeus and Admiral Michael G. Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, have chimed in with even more dire predictions. Clinton's statements have provoked increasing anti-Americanism in the Pakistani army and public, and thus will complicate the effectiveness of any future aid the US may give. On April 24 General Kiyani said that the army was fully capable of defending the country and went on to strongly condemn "the pronouncements" by outside powers that criticized the army and raised doubts about the future of Pakistan.

The Obama administration has promised Pakistan \$1.5 billion a year for the next five years, but the bill is stuck in Congress with a long list of conditions that the Pakistanis are unwilling to accept. In early April other countries pledged a miserly \$5.3 billion in aid, even as Richard Holbrooke, the US special envoy to the region, told me that Pakistan needs \$50 billion. None of this money is likely to come immediately.

The Current Crisis

The present scare was set off in mid-February when the North-West Frontier provincial government signed a deal with a neo-Taliban movement in the scenic Swat valley, a major tourist resort area about a hundred miles from Islamabad, allowing the Taliban to impose strict sharia law in Swat's courts. (The creation of a new Islamic appeals court was announced by the Pakistani government on May 2.) In return for the Pakistani army withdrawing, the Taliban agreed to disarm, then promptly refused to do so. The accord followed the defeat in Swat last year of 12,000 government troops at the hands of some three thousand Taliban after bloody fighting, the blowing up of over one hundred girls' schools, heavy civilian casualties, and the mass exodus of one third of Swat's 1.5 million people. The Taliban swiftly imposed their brutal interpretation of sharia, which allowed for executions, floggings, and destruction of people's homes and girls' schools, as well as preventing women from leaving their homes and wiping out the families that had earlier resisted them.

Despite dire warnings by experts and Pakistan's increasingly vocal commentators in the press and elsewhere that the accord was a major capitulation to the militants and a terrible precedent that contradicted the rule of law as stipulated by the constitution, Zardari and the national parliament approved the deal on April 14 without even a debate. Within days the Taliban in Swat moved further, taking control of the local administration, police, and schools. On April 19 Sufi Mohammed, a radical leader who the government had released from prison in November 2008 and termed "a moderate" and whose son-in-law, Maulana Fazlullah, is now the leader of the Swat Taliban, said that democracy, the legal system of the country, and civil society should be disbanded since they were all "systems of infidels." Having won Swat, the Taliban made clear their intentions to overthrow the national government.

The Taliban in Swat quickly grew to more than eight thousand fighters, including hundreds of foreign and al-Qaeda militants, seasoned Pashtun fighters from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and extremist groups from Punjab and Karachi. They invited Osama bin Laden to come live in Swat. In fact al-Qaeda and the Taliban had targeted Swat three years earlier in their search for a safe, secure sanctuary that would be at a good distance from the Afghan border, with better facilities for an insurgency than FATA, as well as far away from the US drone missiles that have been falling on the tribal areas, killing Taliban leaders. Several top Taliban commanders from FATA have already moved to Swat. The valley also has income from lucrative emerald mines and timber businesses that the Taliban seized from their owners.

It was also obvious that having taken possession of Swat, the Taliban would expand beyond it; yet the army failed to deploy any troops in neighboring areas to deter them. On April 21 the Taliban moved into the adjoining districts of Buner, Shangla, and Dir, from which they threatened several key sites—Mardan, the second-largest city in the North-West Frontier Province; Nowshera, the army's major training center; several large dams; and the Islamabad–Peshawar highway. In Buner they were now just sixty miles from Islamabad.

Finally, on April 24, after much criticism from the Pakistani public, politicians, and Washington, the army began to attack Taliban positions in the three districts. Another 100,000 people fled the army advance. The original deal with the Taliban is now virtually dead since Swat has become the Taliban's main base and will also soon be attacked by the army.

What has shocked the world is not just the spread of the Taliban forces southward, but the lack of the government's will and commitment to oppose them and the army's lack of a counterinsurgency strategy. This disarray makes them all the more vulnerable in view of the apparent cohesiveness of the Taliban's tactics and strategy. Although the group has no single acknowledged leader, it has formed alliances with around forty different extremist groups, some of them with no previous direct connection to the Taliban. Moreover, the Afghan Taliban have become a model for the entire region. The Afghan Taliban of the 1990s have morphed into the Pakistani Taliban and the Central Asian Taliban and it may be only a question of time before we see the Indian Taliban.

Who are the Pakistani Taliban?

The US failure to destroy the al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban leadership in the 2001 war that liberated Afghanistan allowed both groups to take up safe residence in the tribal badlands of the Federal Administered Tribal Areas that form a buffer zone between Afghanistan and Pakistan, where some 4.5 million Pashtun tribesmen live. Other Afghan Taliban leaders sought sanctuary in Quetta, the capital of Balochistan province. Their escape from Afghanistan and their move into FATA were aided by local Pakistani Pashtun tribesmen who had fought for the Afghan Taliban in the 1990s but had now become richer, more radicalized, and more heavily armed in the process of playing host to their guests.

The Pakistani military under former President Pervez Musharraf tried to hunt down al-Qaeda, but never touched the Afghan Taliban, whose regime the Pakistanis had supported in the 1990s and whose presence was now considered a good insurance policy for Pakistan in case the Americans were to leave Afghanistan. Both the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban and their Punjabi extremist allies were seen as potentially useful counters against India—both in any future struggle for the contested region of Kashmir and also to tame the growing Indian influence in Kabul. George W. Bush seems, at least, to have gone along with this Pakistani strategy, urging action against al-Qaeda but never pushing Pakistan to deal with the Taliban threat.

In Pakistan, the radicalized Pakistani Pashtun tribal leaders in FATA began to organize their own militias in 2003 and to draw up their own political agenda to "liberate" Pakistan. Meanwhile, the Afghan Taliban had reconstituted their insurgency in Afghanistan, aided by their Pakistani Pashtun allies and the Pakistani military's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which looked the other way as arms and men flowed into Afghanistan from FATA and Balochistan. Only after Taliban attacks on US forces in Afghanistan increased in the summer of 2004 did Washington force Musharraf to send troops into FATA and clear them out.

The Pakistani army, however, was promptly defeated and a vicious cycle ensued. After every setback, the army signed peace agreements with the Pakistani Taliban that allowed them to consolidate their grip on FATA. In 2007 the separate tribal militias, led by a variety of commanders, coalesced into the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, or Movement of the Pakistani Taliban, led by the charismatic thirty-four-year-old Baitullah Mehsud from the tribal area of South Waziristan. A close ally of both al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban, he was later linked to the assassination of Benazir Bhutto and to hundreds of suicide attacks in Pakistan.

At the same time, other separate but coordinated jihadi movements—some supported in part by radical madrasas funded by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries—sprang up. In the spring of 2007 radical mullahs took over the Red Mosque in Islamabad and announced their intention to impose sharia in the capital. The Musharraf government declined to intervene when the movement numbered hardly a dozen activists. Six months later, thousands of heavily armed militants including Pashtun Taliban, Kashmiris, and al-Qaeda fighters fought a three-day battle with the army in which a hundred people were killed. The extremist survivors vowed revenge and became the core of a new group sponsoring suicide bombings as they fled to FATA to join up with Baitullah Mehsud.

Three years earlier, in 2004, Maulana Fazlullah, the son-in-law of Sufi Muhamed, who was at the time an unknown former ski-lift operator and itinerant mullah, had set up an FM radio station in the Swat valley with a handful of supporters and begun broadcasting inflammatory threats both to local people and to the state of Pakistan. The Musharraf government never shut his station down. Fazlullah soon attracted the attention of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, who poured in men and weapons to support him. By the time the Pakistani army finally went into Swat in November 2007, Fazlullah himself had an army and several radio stations.

In Punjab, extremist Punjabi groups who had been mobilized to fight in Indian Kashmir in the 1990s by the ISI found themselves at loose ends when Musharraf initiated talks with New Delhi and agreed to stop militant infiltration into Indian Kashmir. With no resettlement or rehabilitation programs in place, these Punjabi jihadi groups, who until then had only focused on Kashmir and India, split apart. Some went home, others rejoined madrasas, but thousands of them linked up with the Pakistani Taliban and were able to mount suicide attacks in Pakistani cities where the Taliban themselves had little access.

None of these groups could have survived if the military had carried out a serious counterterror strategy; but the Pakistani army never shut down any of them. Even though they were all openly opposing the Pakistani state, the army still considered them part of the front line against India and continued to stay in touch with them.

The Army and Politics

The army has always defined Pakistan's national security goals. Currently it has two strategic interests: first, it seeks to ensure that a balance of terror and power is maintained with respect to India, and the jihadis are seen as part of this strategy. Second, the army supports the Afghan Taliban as a hedge against US withdrawal from Afghanistan and also against Indian influence in Kabul, which has grown considerably. Containing the domestic jihadi threat has been a tactical rather than a strategic matter for the army, so there have been bouts of fighting with the militants and also peace deals with them; and these have been interspersed with policies of jailing them and freeing them—all part of a complex and duplicitous game.

The Bush administration pandered to the illusion that the Pakistani army had a strategic interest in defeating home-grown extremism, including both the Afghan Taliban and al-Qaeda. Under Bush, the US poured \$11.9 billion into Pakistan, 80 percent of which went to the army. Instead of revamping Pakistan's capacity for counterinsurgency, the army bought \$8 billion worth of weapons for use against

India—funds that are still unaccounted for, either by the US Congress or the Pakistani government. Not a single major public development project was initiated in Pakistan by Washington during the Bush era.

Despite US military aid, anti-Americanism has flourished in the army, public opinion, and the press and television, fueled by the idea that Pakistan was being made to fight America's war, while the Americans were unwilling to help Pakistan regain influence in Afghanistan. The US is accused both of helping India gain a strong foothold in Kabul and of declining to put pressure on New Delhi to resolve the Kashmir dispute. Bush's signing of the nuclear deal with India last year was the last straw for the Pakistani army. In military and public thinking, Pakistan was seen as sacrificing some two thousand soldiers in the war on terror on behalf of the Americans, while in return the Americans were recognizing the legitimacy of India's nuclear weapons program. Pakistan's nuclear weapons got no such acceptance.

Many in Pakistan had enormous hopes that the general elections in February 2008 would bring in a civilian government that would be a counterweight to the army and redefine Pakistan's national security as requiring support for the economy and education and improvement in relations with Pakistan's neighbors. Pakistanis, fed up with Musharraf's eight years of military rule and stung by Bhutto's assassination, voted for two moderate, pro-democracy, semi-secular parties—Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), now led by her husband Zardari, on the national level, and the Awami National Party (ANP) as the provincial government in the North-West Frontier Province. It was a resounding defeat for the Islamic parties that Musharraf had placed in office in the NWFP and Balochistan in the heavily rigged 2002 elections.

Here was the last opportunity for the politicians to concentrate on two vital needs: reviving the moribund economy and working with the army on a decisive strategy to combat Talibanization. The world looked for leadership from the PPP, and foreign donors promised financial aid if it could deliver. According to many polls, the Pakistani public wanted the politicians to unite and work together. Instead Zardari and the main opposition leader, Nawaz Sharif, who heads the Pakistan Muslim League that holds sway in Punjab province, have spent the last year battling each other, as the economy sank further, Talibanization spread more widely, and the army and Western donors became more and more fed up with the politicians. General Kiyani has said that he is willing to take orders from the civilian government but clear orders were never forthcoming.

In the NWFP, the Awami National Party failed to stand up to the Taliban after they began an assassination campaign against ANP ministers and members of parliament, forcing the ANP leaders to disappear into bunkers while capitulating to the Taliban. The Swat deal was initiated by the ANP, which naively believed that the Taliban could be contained within Swat. The party is now divided, weakened and unpopular among the Pashtuns who voted for it in overwhelming numbers just a year ago. Its failure has wider consequences, for the ANP is the only Pashtun party that could counter the Taliban claim that the Pashtuns are pro-jihad and extremist. The ANP version of Pashtunwali—the tribal code of behavior—is nation-alistic but moderate and in favor of democracy. Right now the extremist Taliban ideology is winning out as Pashtun cultural leaders, aid workers, teachers, doctors, and lawyers are cowed by the Taliban adherents.

Now that the army has moved into the districts around Swat and is battling the Taliban, it is seen by the public as a two-edged sword. Although people want the army to drive back the Taliban, the army lacks both a counterinsurgency strategy and the kind of weapons that would be needed to carry it out. In early May, extensive fighting was reported in Swat after the Taliban reiterated their refusal to surrender their weapons, fortified their positions, and ambushed a military convoy, killing one soldier. In response, the army imposed a curfew in the valley's main city of Mingora and ordered the civilian population to move out. On the night of May 7, following an announcement by Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani that the government was going to "eliminate" the Taliban militants, the army launched a major air and ground offensive in Swat, dropping bombs and firing artillery around Mingora, where an estimated four thousand Taliban fighters had dug in and planted landmines.

In FATA and Swat, villages have been flattened by the army's artillery and aerial bombing; many civilians have been killed, and local tribal leaders who have tried to resist the Taliban have not been supported by the army. Meanwhile, on May 12, the United Nations Refugee Agency reported that it had registered more than 500,000 displaced people from the conflict in Buner, Dir, and Swat since

May 2 alone, joining another 500,000 that have been uprooted in the NWFP since last summer, and others who have not yet registered with the agency. According to a spokesman for the Pakistani military, the total number of refugees has risen to 1.3 million. But by mid-May, the Pakistani government had no adequate plans to look after this influx—only a fraction of which had been given temporary shelter in camps—or to provide aid.

Since 2004, practically everything that could go wrong in this war has gone wrong. Most important of all, the army and the government never protected the Pashtun tribal chiefs and leaders who were pro-government—some three hundred have had their throats slit by the Taliban in FATA, and the rest have fled. Even though there was significant local resistance to the Taliban in Swat and Buner, tribal councils begged the army to cease its operations because they have been so destructive for civilians.

The insurgency in Pakistan is perhaps even more deadly than the one in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan there is only one ethnic group strongly opposing the government—the Pashtuns who make up the Taliban—and so fighting is largely limited to the south and east of the country, while the other major ethnic groups in the west and the north are vehemently anti-Taliban. Moreover, more than a few Pashtuns and their tribal leaders support the Karzai government. In Pakistan, the Pashtun Taliban are now being aided and abetted by extremists from all the major ethnic groups in Pakistan. They may not be popular but they generate fear and terror from Karachi on the south coast to Peshawar on the Afghan border.

In Afghanistan the state is weak and unpopular but it is heavily backed by the US and NATO military presence. In addition, the Afghans have several things going for them. They are tired of nearly thirty years of war; they have already suffered under a Taliban regime and don't want a return of Taliban rule; they crave development and education; and they are fiercely patriotic, which has kept the country together despite the bloodshed. The Afghans have always refused to see their country divided.

In Pakistan there is no such broad national identity or unity. Many young Balochs today are fiercely determined to create an independent Balochistan. The ethnic identities of people in the other provinces have become a driving force for disunity. The gap between the rich and poor has never been greater, and members of the Pakistani elite have rarely acted responsibly toward the less fortunate masses. The Taliban have gained some adherents by imposing rough forms of land redistribution in some of the areas it controls, expropriating the property of rich landlords. Education and job creation have been the least-funded policies of Pakistan's governments, whether military or civilian, and literacy levels are abysmal; there are now some 20 million youth under age seventeen who are not in school. The justice system has virtually collapsed in many areas, which is why the Taliban demand for speedy justice has some popular appeal. Moreover, the Pakistani public has to deal with the differing versions of Pakistani policy put out by the army, the political parties, the Islamic fundamentalists, and the press and other components of civil society. There is confusion about what actually constitutes a threat to the state and what is needed for nation-building.

The last two years have bought some hope in the growth of the middle class, an articulate and increasingly influential civil society made up partly of urban professionals and publicly involved women. Most Pakistanis are not Islamic extremists and believe in moderate and spiritual forms of Islam, including Sufism. However, Pakistan is now reaching a tipping point. There is a chronic failure of leadership, whether by civilian politicians or the army. President Zardari's decision to invade Swat in early May came only after pressure was applied by the Obama administration and the army and the government had been left with no other palatable options. But with the Taliban opening new fronts, it will soon become impossible for the army to respond to the multiple threats it faces on so many geographically distant battlefields. The Taliban's campaigns to assassinate politicians and administrators have demoralized the government.

The Obama administration can provide money and weapons but it cannot recreate the state's will to resist the Taliban and pursue more effective policies. Pakistan desperately needs international aid, but its leaders must first define a strategy that demonstrates to its own people and other nations that it is willing to stand up to the Taliban and show the country a way forward.

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