

## PAKISTAN

### Preventing a Taliban victory

By Pervez Hoodbhoy

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**Now that the army has turned serious, Baitullah Mehsud cannot expect to stroll down Constitution Avenue any time soon, nor hope to sit in the presidency.**

A few thousand mountain barbarians, even if trained by Al Qaeda's best, cannot possibly seize power from a modern, well-armed state with 600,000 soldiers. The spectre of Pakistan collapsing in six months — a fear expressed by a senior US military adviser in March — has evaporated.

But there is little cause for elation. Daily terror attacks across the country give abundant proof that religious extremism has streamed down the mountains into the plains. Through abductions, beheadings and suicide bombings, Taliban insurgents are destabilising Pakistan, damaging its economy and spreading despondency.

Look at Islamabad, a city of fear. Machine-gun bunkers are ubiquitous while traffic barely trickles past concrete blocks placed across its super-wide roads. Upscale restaurants, fearing suicide bombers, have removed their signs although they still hope clients will remember. Who will be the next target? Girls' schools, Internet cafes, bookshops, or western clothing stores with mannequins? Or perhaps shops selling toilet paper, underwear, and other un-Islamic goods?

The impact on Pakistan's women is enormous. Throwing acid, or threatening to do so, has been spectacularly successful in making women embrace modesty. Today there is scarcely a female face visible anywhere in the Frontier province. Men are also changing dress — anxious private employers, government departments and NGOs have advised their male employees in Peshawar and other cities to wear shalwar-kameez rather than trousers. Video shops are being bombed out of business, and many barbers have put 'no-shave' notices outside their shops.

If public support were absent, extremist violence could be relatively easy to deal with. But extremism does not lie merely at the fringes. As an example, let us recall that 5,000 people crammed the streets outside Lal Masjid to pray behind the battle-hardened pro-Taliban militant leader, Maulana Abdul Aziz, the day after he was released from prison on the orders of interior minister Rehman Malik.

In the political arena, the extremists have high-profile cheerleaders like Imran Khan, Qazi Hussain Ahmad and Hamid Gul who rush to justify every attack on Pakistan's people and culture. To them it makes no difference that Baitullah Mehsud proudly admits to the murder of Allama Dr Sarfaraz Ahmad Naeemi, the recent Peshawar mosque bombing, the earlier Wah slaughter and scores of other hideous suicide attacks. Like broken gramophone records, they chant "Amrika, Amrika, Amrika" after every new Taliban atrocity.

Nevertheless, bad as things are, there is a respite. To the relief of those who wish to see Pakistan survive, the army finally moved against the Taliban menace. But, while the state has committed men to battle, it cannot provide them a convincing reason why they must fight.

For now some soldiers have bought into the amazing invention that the Baitullahs and Fazlullahs are India's secret agents. Others have been told that they are actually fighting a nefarious American-Jewish plot to destabilise Pakistan. To inspire revenge, still others are being shown the revolting Taliban-produced videos of Pakistani soldiers being tortured and beheaded.

That the enemy lacks an accurate name typifies the confusion and contradiction within. In official parlance they are called 'militants' or 'extremists' but never religious extremists. It is astonishing that the semi-literate Fazlullah, on whose head the government has now placed a price, is reverentially referred to as 'maulana'. On the other hand there is no hesitation in describing Baloch fighters — who fight for a nationalist cause rather than a religious one — as rebels or terrorists.

A muddled nation can still fight, but not very well and not for too long. Self-deception enormously increases vulnerability. Yet, Pakistan's current army and political leaders cannot alone be blamed for the confusion; history's baggage is difficult to dispense with.

To say what really lies at the heart of Pakistan's problems will require summoning more courage than presently exists. The unmentionable truth — one etched in stone — is that when a state proclaims to have a religious mission, it inevitably privileges those who organise religious life and interpret religious text. It then becomes difficult — perhaps impossible — to challenge those who claim to fight for religious causes. After all, what's wrong with the Taliban mission to bring the Sharia to Pakistan?

If there was one solid unchallengeable version of the faith, then at least there would be a clear answer to this

question. But conflict becomes inevitable once different models and interpretations start competing. Whose version of the Sharia should prevail? Whose jihad is the correct one? Who shall decide? Lacking a central authority — such as a pope or caliph — every individual or group can claim to be in possession of the divine truth. The murder of Dr Naeemi by the Taliban comes from this elementary fact.

For now the Baitullahs, Fazlullahs, Mangal Baghs, and their ilk are on the run. Yet, they could still win some day. Even if killed, others would replace them. So, while currently necessary, military action alone can never be sufficient. Nor will peace come from merely building more roads, schools and hospitals or inventing a new justice system.

Ultimately it is the power of ideas that shall decide between victory and defeat. It is here that Pakistan is weakest and most vulnerable. A gaping philosophical and ideological void has left the door open to demagogues who exploit resource scarcity and bad governance. They use every failing of the state to create an insurrectionary mood and churn out suicide bombers. Only a few Islamic scholars, like Dr Naeemi, have ventured to challenge them.

The long-term defence of Pakistan therefore demands a determined ideological offensive and a decisive break with the past. Nations win wars only if there is a clear rallying slogan and a shared goal. For this, Pakistan must reinvent itself as a state that is seen to care for its people. Instead of seeking to fix the world's problems — Kashmir, Afghanistan and Palestine included — it must work to first fix its own.

A nation's best defence is a loyal citizenry. This can be created only by offering equal rights and opportunities to all regardless of province, language and, most importantly, religion and religious sect. Navigating the way to heaven must be solely an individual's concern, not that of the state.

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