

Pakistan: The Myth of Civilizing War

IT WOULD HARDLY BE AN EXAGGERATION to suggest that, today, in the baleful shadow of the Great War on Terror, one central site of intra-progressive discord has been the question of the broad Left's relation to political and militant Islam. The brouhaha surrounding the candidacy of Ilhem Moussaid in the French New Anticapitalist Party, and the fallout from Gita Sahgal's resignation from Amnesty International over the organization's work with Moazzam Begg are but some of the more recent illustrations of a fault-line that runs deep in progressive politics.

Certainly, in the abstract the controversy seems perplexing, since the Left position – at this level – is not complicated: to unrelenting massacres on today's imperial frontiers, to wars on civil liberties and immigrants at home, and to the role of racist caricatures of the Muslim world in legitimizing them both, we stand wholeheartedly opposed; and simultaneously, to the patriarchal, retrograde politics animating many prominent Islamist groups today, we object no less vociferously.

Yet as political conjunctures pose concrete questions, these twin principles reveal themselves as nothing more than premises that set the parameters for a developed perspective. The substantive task – and the task that has, unfortunately, proved too daunting for a few on the Left, today – is to ascertain what, given the balance of forces before us, a forward-looking politics demands.

In Pakistan, the State has massively escalated its “home-grown” War on Terror (hand-in-hand with Obama's surge in Afghanistan), confounding some of the country's progressives on the question of what these twin commitments demand in the

present historical context. Distressingly, more than a few of these activists and intellectuals have cited the specter of a creeping, forbidding “Talibanization” as grounds for cheerleading the offensives waged by the military in the Northwest[1] – “heavy-hearted” support, we’re told, for a policy and an institution guilty of mass displacements and untold atrocities.[2] In so doing, I will argue, they are committing a grave analytical, political, and moral blunder – at best condemning themselves to irrelevance; at worst fomenting unwelcome, purposeless confusion, as the Left attempts to orient itself in a theater of escalating war.

**The State:
“Form of State, Form of Regime”**

THE STRUGGLE AGAINST FUNDAMENTALISM demands – first – a searching appraisal of the historical context in which the problem has evolved. It is worth stressing that we can make no sense of the task at hand if our starting-point is steeped in imperial histrionics. The only path to a progressive strategy, in Pakistan and in the United States, runs through an attentive and independent assessment of the factors that have thrust militancy to the center of the political landscape.

Without discounting the complexity of the issues involved, I will insist that – at a high level of abstraction – the structuring reality is easy enough to apprehend: all Left strategy must begin from the elementary fact that the Pakistani State has forever played a sordid, suffocating role in the political life of the country. The political leadership has been compelled, decade after decade, to share power with the Army, precisely because of its congenital inability to represent meaningfully the aspirations of the provinces and the poor. I mean this both in the larger sense that Pakistan has had three (and-a-half, now) cycles of dictatorship succeeding failed periods of civilian rule, and in the specific sense that each civilian government has been painfully cautious not to alienate the establishment, when in

power.[3]

The arguable exception to this pattern was the “missed opportunity” of the Z.A. Bhutto years, in the 1970s, where it might well have been possible for the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) to lead a popular challenge to the Army. Yet, even here, the possibilities can be overstated: not only was Bhutto himself a man of the establishment (Foreign Minister under General Ayub Khan, Chief Martial Law Administrator from 1971-1973, and champion of the Army’s iniquities in East Bengal and then in Baluchistan), but he sought always to contain the popular upsurge that propelled him into power.[4] Modest reforms were coupled with uncompromising repression: an attempt to establish hegemony over organizations of the working-class, for example, that involved the “wholesale destruction of many trade unions’ offices, occupation of factories (and even whole industrial areas) by armed police, and widespread arrests, tortures, and in some cases assassinations of militant labor leaders.”[5] As Aijaz Ahmad wrote on the eve of Bhutto’s murder by the man he had himself appointed Army Chief of Staff, Zia ul-Haq: “reform and repression... [constituted] a very precise dialectic,” mandated by the extraordinary exigencies of the era and, in the final analysis, in the service of the existing class structure.[6]

The larger point thus remains: these two alternating forms of rule (or, “forms of regime”) are but different ways in which an underlying status quo (a centralized State lacking genuine legitimacy amongst the urban and rural poor, and amongst national minorities) has been articulated politically.[7] It is this status quo – an unbroken, abhorrent “form of State” – that has to be at the very forefront of our minds, when addressing the myriad challenges before us.

Militancy

REGARDING POLITICAL ISLAM in Pakistan, then, this grounding thesis suggests three defining features of the present conjuncture,

without which no political strategy can hope to be coherent. The Left ignores these at its peril.

First, the Pakistani State has always regarded the ideology of the “ultra-Right” instrumentally. Domestically, as is well known, it has invoked Islam in order to chloroform class and provincial cleavages, and to suppress the politics to which they have given rise. As Hamza Alavi argued, in response to regional protest that began in the early 1950s (most seriously in East Bengal), “Islam and the notion of Islamic brotherhood became the order of the day. It was unpatriotic on the part of Bengalis, Sindhis, Pathans and Baluch to make demands in terms of their regional ethnic identities because all Pakistanis were brothers in Islam.”[8] Even Bhutto’s populist challenge succumbed, infamously currying favor with the right-wing, by declaring the Ahmadi community “non-Muslim” in 1974.[9] And subsequently, of course, followed the dark years of Zia’s “Islamization,” during which the “ultra-Rightists” were championed in an aggressive effort to sanctify the military’s writ.

In the specific case of the Taliban in the border districts, this pattern persists. The historical roots are well known: in active collaboration with the American war on the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the Pakistani Army positioned itself at the head of the networks of patronage that laid the foundation for militancy in the region.[10] Via the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), billions of dollars were funneled toward the most rabidly reactionary of the militant commanders, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. When he failed to seize control of the country in the stygian civil war of the early 90s, the ISI turned its attention to the Taliban, “a group mainly comprising students it had trained since 1980 in madrassahs in the North-West Frontier Province.”[11]

Today, mortally afraid of being cornered by India from the West and the East, the Pakistani Army remains locked in a predictably devious geopolitical tussle. It seems clear, for

instance, that it is in league with elements of the Afghan Taliban.[12] And even in the case of the myriad groups that comprise the Pakistani Taliban (the TTP),[13] the reputed “existential” threat, the opposition of the Pakistani Army has been inconsistent across time and place. As has been noted for years, the military has repeatedly courted individual militant leaders (the “Good Taliban”) in its fight with others (the “Bad Taliban”).[14] These, it bears emphasizing, are groups with no less millennial, misogynistic, and venal an agenda than those against whom, it is alleged, our Army is fighting its Great War for Civilization.

Any Leftist strategy, in sum, that dresses up twists in the Army’s strategic logic as a newfound commitment to a secular Pakistan is gravely misguided. No doubt, the military can afford to dispose of some of these groups when they stray from the “party” program. But to suggest, as some have done, that this means that – finally! – the Army can be trusted to rid the north-west of misogyny, bespeaks an inexcusable, wishful myopia.

Second, the insurgencies in the north-west have come to stand in for everything that is frightening about escalating fundamentalism in the rest of the country (the brutalization of the education system, attacks on minorities and women, the “thinning out” of national culture, the rise of conservative mores, etc.). No Leftist worth his or her salt can stay silent on these issues, of course. But neither can our political strategy fall prey to the temptation of falsely conflating the many crimes of the Pakistani Taliban with these trends (in which, in fact, it is frequently the State that is complicit). Many an apocalyptic pro-war argument is premised on precisely this mistake: for Pervez Hoodbhoy, for instance, the thrust is this ominous, sneaking connection between his veiled, silent students and the depredations of Fazlullah in Swat.[15] Similarly, last spring, at an event hosted by the Women’s Action Forum in Karachi, “Talibanization” was the catchword

for all this and more. One student representative fervidly screeched, for example, that her parents' generation had enjoyed Karachi's discos, which were now no more. The implication: hence we must have war in Paktunkhwa!

Outsourcing our struggle to today's political and military apparatus, which is anyway staffed by some of the most vile formations in the country (the Muttahida Qaumi Movement, for example), will not advance secular, minority-friendly, or tolerant politics in the slightest. In fact, it is sure to set this battle back. We are celebrating and empowering the same Army, lest we forget, that is – today – callously and brutally repressing an ongoing popular liberation struggle in Baluchistan (the fifth time the Army has been deployed since independence: 1948, 1958, 1962, 1973-77).[16] At a minimum, some 1,600 Baluchis have been “disappeared” since 2005 alone (this is the number submitted by the attorney-general to the Supreme Court; activists put the number at 6,000),[17] part of the several thousands that have gone missing in Pakistan at-large since 9/11.

It takes a peculiar species of Left-wing “heavy-heartedness,” then, to succumb to this State's fabricated outrage at the atrocities of the TTP. Effectively feudal landlords today sit in government in Sindh – those subject to their wicked writ harbor no such illusions.[18] Moreover, the persecution of minorities in the “integrated” parts of Pakistan continues apace, and with impunity. In a particularly egregious example that came to light last month, police allegedly burned (to death) a Christian man and raped his wife for the crime of refusing to convert to Islam.[19] No action, it seems, has yet been taken.

Third, no serious Left observer can afford to deny that these insurgencies have their roots in a deplorable history of economic and political oppression. In a 2005 brief, the Asian Development Bank described FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) as “the most impoverished part of Pakistan,” noting

that it “falls behind the rest of the country in almost all... socio-economic indicators.”[20] Recently it was noted that a list of the ten most food-insecure districts in the country contains five Taliban-hit areas: Upper Dir, North Waziristan, Mohmand, South Waziristan, and Orakzai.[21] Certainly, severe structural oppression is only a partial explanation for the rise of the many militant groups.[22] Yet it is nonetheless crucial to foreground this angle of the issue, as it clarifies the bankruptcy of relying on an avowedly neoliberal Pakistani establishment to resolve the problem of militancy, especially in the long-term. Absent the insight, in the narratives of those for whom the Taliban are “barbarian hordes” without origins, the temptation is to militarize and outsource a struggle that can only be waged politically, and by the Left.

In this vein, unrelenting denunciation of the many atrocities committed by the TTP, which is certainly integral to a Left path forward, must not occlude the no less depraved history of the central State in the north-west. According to the government’s own figures, the estimated literacy rate amongst women in FATA, for example, is a criminal 3 percent (in the settled districts of NWFP – North-West Frontier Province – or Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, the figure is 19 percent).[23] This sorry reality is a consequence of the fact that the Pakistani government has, for decades, perpetuated the model of governance pioneered by the British Raj, wherein effective authority was handed over to an array of pliant elites. Supreme judicial authority resides in the viceroy-like figure of the Political Agent, whose consultations with a tribal jirga more-or-less constitute due process. The penal code that complements this arrangement is openly draconian, legislating the punishment of entire tribes for the crimes of individual members.[24] It is no coincidence, after all, that one of the Pakistani Taliban’s central rallying points was the offer of “speedy justice,” to be executed via their own Sharia courts. Though the Government – not for the first time – announced its intention to reform this condemnable legal-

political apparatus in August 2009, and Parliament reiterated the need for these measures earlier this year, progress has yet to be made.

The Left, and the Way Forward

IF WE ROOT OURSELVES in these few premises, the line advocated by some – that a “weak and irrelevant” Left support the “lesser evil” in the Pakistani Army’s battle with the TTP – reveals itself to be analytically misinformed, politically feckless, and morally unpalatable. It would be unwise to overstate how influential the position itself has been – most activists are too intimately familiar with the historic priorities of the Pakistani establishment, I think, to have been duped by the Manichean framing of the war.

Instead, in the abstract, the tasks of the Left remain what they have always been, Taliban or not. It is a sign of the times – of the pervasive grip of Islamophobia on the minds of activists everywhere – that it seems necessary to remind allies (and ourselves, even) that Pakistan, too, is a country comprised of workers and peasants, of class exploitation and class struggle. Perhaps the defining political issue in Pakistan is the national question, for example – yet few in American antiwar circles would know that in every instance, this struggle is led by overwhelmingly secular forces (or indeed, at times, even that it exists).

The Left – however fragmented – must first take solace in the solidity of its political and ideological moorings, rather than nursing wounds inflicted by past defeats. It remains obvious, I think, that it is only the Left which can make substantive sense of what afflicts Pakistan, and why (imperialism, neoliberalism, militarism, ethnic chauvinism, Islamism, etc.) – and, if I may, only the Left which possesses, in its history and in its principles, the political strategy required to organize mass resistance in response.

Once again, advocating this does not at all mean that we ignore the TTP and their myriad iniquities. In fact, quite the opposite – abandoning the entirely manufactured sense of urgency peddled by our elites for reasons of State is the precondition for operating with a principled, ever more severe sense of urgency with respect to the real tasks at hand. Though Pakistan is not, in any sense, about to fall to the Taliban, it is – in this sense – already in the hands of a panoply of forces whose agenda we unreservedly condemn.

Thus, to the tragedy that has befallen the people of FATA and NWFP (or Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa), it is incumbent upon the Left to be frank and far-sighted. There exist no “within-the-system” solutions to the crises that confront the people of the region. Their partial, self-serving, and deeply unethical nature aside, military operations have done little more than scatter guerrillas from old stomping grounds; the underlying problems (and likely the war itself) promise only to intensify in the years ahead.[25]

Fundamentally, then, the resolution of these crises will demand an overhaul of the geopolitical and socio-economic “facts-on-the-ground”: among other things, an immediate end to the U.S.-led occupation of Afghanistan; the decolonization and political, legal, social integration of FATA; the rapid economic uplift of the poor of the area, through land reforms, infrastructure provision, the expropriation and de-funding of our military empire, and more; the decommodification of basic necessities; the construction of schools, hospitals, homes, and universities.

Certainly, this guiding vision is no substitute for tactics in the short-term. Yet it is nonetheless clear that, because of the history and principles that inform it, the path from the present to these goals does not at any stage run through the Pakistani establishment. It is this, above all else, that has been the most damaging of all the illusions peddled by pro-war progressives. Against them we must insist

on a reinvigorated, independent, and clear-eyed Left, which has to undertake – as it is already doing – the painful, thankless, and long-term task of grassroots organizing and agitation.

The economic crisis that hit Pakistan particularly hard (as per ruling theologies of liberation, an ongoing \$11 billion IMF bailout has mandated austerity and retrenchment) has already provoked trenchant resistance, ranging from massive riots against bus fare hikes in Rawalpindi, to a 25-day occupation of a five-star hotel in the heart of Karachi, to a 1,600-strong, 26-day strike at a tire factory run by a now-retired military general. The burden here, as elsewhere, is to strengthen our infrastructures of resistance towards the goal of uniting these disparate struggles.

That it promises to be a long and uncertain battle was never in doubt.

Footnotes

1. There have been three major military offensives in the past eighteen months (in Bajaur, Swat, and South Waziristan), complemented by a series of surrogate operations throughout the northwest. At its height, some two to three million people were displaced, including about half of Bajaur's entire population. Today, roughly one million have yet to return to their homes (see the UNHCR's [most recent reports](#)). A media blackout on areas under siege has meant that estimates of civilian casualties are unavailable. Nonetheless, scattered anecdotes and independent reports have made for frightening reading. The *Economist*, for example, [reported](#) that after the Swat operation, "an estimated 300 to 400 corpses of suspected Taliban... turned up in Swat, dumped on street corners, bridges or outside homes..." ("Pakistan's Swat Valley" Oct. 1, 2009). And only recently, in what is now "liberated" Swat, the military responded to a recent suicide blast with an operation

of terrifying proportions – reportedly rounding up some 1,000 residents to undergo a search in the rain, and detaining a similarly enormous number (“[Over 1,000 rounded up in Mingora search operation](#),” *The News*, Feb. 26, 2010).

2. As one ex-reporter wrote recently, “The media rarely reports on the civilian deaths due to a combination of self-censorship, difficulties in accessing the conflict, and pressure from the military. The cover-up of what is going on is systematic.” (see Fahad Desmukh, “[The Myth of War Reporting](#),” *thirdworldism*, April 14, 2010).

3. See Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, “Pakistan: Crisis of a Frontline State,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 40: 1 (2010), pp. 105-122.

4. This was Pakistan’s 1968, documented best in Tariq Ali’s *Pakistan: Military Rule or People’s Power* (New York: William Morrow, 1970).

5. Aijaz Ahmad, “Democracy and Dictatorship in Pakistan,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 8:4 (1978), p. 486.

6. Ahmad, p. 486.

7. Certainly, a more developed formulation of this claim would accommodate the massive social and economic changes in Pakistan since independence. One might further argue that it begs more questions than it answers. But provisionally (or even just heuristically), given the limitations of this piece, it will have to suffice as is.

8. Hamza Alavi, “Pakistan and Islam: Ethnicity and Ideology,” in Hamza Alavi and Fred Halliday, *State and Ideology in the Middle East and Pakistan* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988), pp. 106-107.

9. Ahmed Akhtar Khan, “[Rare Attack on Pakistan Ahmadis](#).” *BBC News*, Oct. 7, 2005.

10. See Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* (New York: Three Leaves Press, 2005), pp. 128-161.

11. Mamdani, p. 159.

12. The recent arrests of high-profile members of the Quetta Shura hardly mark a break in these relations, as some have suggested; rather, the worry for the Army was that it was going to be left out of the negotiations that seem to be underway. As a show of strength, it played its hand. The underlying contours of its strategy, however, have remained the same (See Gareth Porter, "[Defying U.S., Pakistan Keeps Custody of Baradar](#)," *IPS*, Feb 28, 2010).

13. The TTP came together in December 2007 on the shared goal of fighting the Pakistani State, which they regarded as a satrap of the American military. This line has been repudiated by the Afghan Taliban, who on numerous occasions have made clear that they regard attacks inside Pakistan as contrary to their interests and principles.

14. These commanders include: in the Mehsud areas in the Eastern half of South Waziristan, Qari Zainuddin Mehsud (died June 2009) and Toofan Mehsud; in the Wazir tribal areas in the Western half, Maulvi Nazir Ahmed; in North Waziristan, Hafiz Gul Bahadur; in Tank, Turkistan Bhattani. (See "[Baitullah rival Qari Zainuddin shot dead in D I Khan](#)," *DAWN News*, June 23, 2009, "[NWA Taliban pledge adherence to accord](#)," *The News*, March 18, 2010, "[Making Friends with the Taliban](#)," *BBC News*, June 24, 2009.)

15. See Pervez Hoodbhoy, "[The Saudi-ization of Pakistan](#)" in *Newsline*, Jan 2009.

16. See Karlos Zurutuza, "[Pakistan's Other Insurgents](#)," in *Vice Magazine*, Nov. 2009.

17. See Madiha Tahir, "[Pakistan's Broken Mirror](#)," in *The National*, March 25, 2010.

18. See Adaner Usmani, "[Struggling for Land](#)" in *Zamana.org*, Sept. 2009.

19. See Fareed Khan, "[...Christian is burned alive...](#)", in *AsiaNews.it*, March 24, 2010.

20. See ADB, "[FATA Rural Development](#)".

21. Four of the other five on this list are, tellingly, in Baluchistan (see Abid Qayum Suleri, "[Hunger Pains](#)" in *The News*, Feb 27, 2010).

22. It cannot itself explain, for example, why resistance has taken a religious, "right-wing" cast (for that, at a minimum, one needs to incorporate into the narrative the multiple legacies of the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s).

23. Scattered socioeconomic indicators are available on the [website of the government of FATA](#).

24. To this day, the Frontier Crimes Regulation Act (FCR) – handiwork of Lord Curzon, in 1901 – remains in place. This, lest we forget, is the same Lord Curzon who, confronted with unruly tribes in the border regions, famously said: "Not until the military steamroller has passed over the country from end to end, will there be peace." Cue the F-16s, it seems.

25. A striking illustration of this is the recent intensification of military operations in Orakzai and Khyber, justified by the claim that militants have fled there in the face of the South Waziristan campaign. In Orakzai, the new operations have already displaced some 200,000 individuals since the turn of the year – about *half* the total population of the district ("[200,000 civilians flee Pakistan military offensive](#)," *AP News*, April 12 2010). And in Khyber, in mid-April, the military twice bombed a "militant" outpost in Tirah – once initially, and once as residents came to rescue people from the rubble – duly killing some seventy-one civilians. ("[Villagers claim many slain during operation](#)," *DAWN News*,

April 13, 2010).