

# Between imperial client and useful enemy

## Pakistan's permanent crisis

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**P**akistani scholar-activist Eqbal Ahmed, who died in 1999, had a canny ability to predict events. In a 1974 article for the *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, he suggested that Pakistan was headed towards a police state structure because of the class and ideological composition of the military and its supremacy over civil society.<sup>1</sup> Other sectors, such as the bureaucracy, feudal landlords and the small entrepreneurial class, were weak and subordinate. Opposition parties, meanwhile, were 'given more to hyperbole and public meetings than to organizing and resisting. A large part of the opposition is either ideologically reactionary or indistinguishable from the party in power.' A police state would use either a kind of developmental-fascist ideology (as happened in Chile, Brazil and Greece) or it would rely on religious fundamentalism, and would find an eager sponsor in the United States. 'Unfortunately,' the article concludes, 'the democratic and revolutionary groups in Pakistan to whom falls the responsibility of halting this trend are as yet only weakly developed.'

The main elements of Eqbal Ahmed's analysis remain valid today. The military has become even stronger relative to civil society, opposing social forces weaker and divided, with democratic and revolutionary groups only weakly developed. At the epicentre of the War on Terror, Pakistan's current predicament brings together the inability of the state to deliver development or justice to its people, an ambiguous imperial sponsor, all the economic woes of neoliberal capitalism, and the cooptation mechanisms of 'democracy promotion'. Despite an absence of legitimacy, organizational inefficacy, and shrinking capacity to respond to challenges from the USA or India, Pakistan's military dictatorship survives because it is stronger than civil society and political alternatives to it have been destroyed. The strength of the regime is based on the absence of feasible alternatives.

### **Ousting Musharraf: back to civilian power?**

President Musharraf resigned in August 2008, but, as Tariq Ali commented, 'Over the last 50 years the USA has worked mainly with the Pakistan army. This has been its preferred instrument. Nothing has changed. The question being asked now is how long it will be before the military is back at the helm.'<sup>2</sup>

In Pakistan the reins of government are the prize of a three-way contest between civilian authority, a weak civil society and the military, with the military by far the strongest player. Musharraf came to power in a coup back in 1999. When his legitimacy was eventually challenged by the Supreme Court last year, he sacked the Supreme Court judges. The judges responded and large numbers mobilized alongside them

in the 'lawyers' movement' that began when Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry was suspended in March 2007. That movement also found support and strength from commercial media that had paradoxically acquired some new freedom under Musharraf's dictatorship, and continue tentatively to test that freedom. The next phase of the contest was fought in the arena of the parliamentary elections, which Benazir Bhutto, after negotiations with Washington and Musharraf, returned to Pakistan to contest – only to be assassinated in December 2007. The elections took place anyway, in February 2008; Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) as well as the Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML–N) of Nawaz Sharif, who had been prime minister until ousted by Musharraf's coup in 1999, came to dominate the post-coup government. The Pakistan Muslim League–Quaid-e-Azam (PML–Q), Musharraf's party, made a poor showing, as did those Islamist parties that had enjoyed state sponsorship under Musharraf. When the PPP and PML–N reached power with help from popular support and the prestige of the lawyer's struggle, they did not reinstate the Supreme Court.

Both Nawaz Sharif and the PPP head and new President Asif Ali Zardari, Benazir Bhutto's widow, have reasons to fear an independent judiciary. Zardari and Sharif had both been up for corruption charges for their behaviour under previous governments. The post-election brokering involved various mutual amnesties. Moreover, if the judiciary didn't give in to the military government, it might not give in to the civilian government either.

In August 2008, Zardari and Sharif finally made their move, taking action to impeach President Musharraf and stating that the reinstatement of the judges would follow. After months in power, during which they neither restored the judges nor made any headway with the country's growing number of political or economic problems, the fractious coalition of the PPP and PML–N agreed on a plan: to move against Musharraf, using the prestige the elected government still retains, and to reinstate the judges. It was a risky strategy for leaders who are dogged by charges of corruption and illegality dating from previous turns in government (or, in Zardari's case, behind the scenes in government). There is still no plan for dealing with the US occupation of Afghanistan or the resistance against it, or with other forces operating from the Afghan border area of Pakistan. Nor do they have a plan for the economic problems. No doubt the strategy is to blame Musharraf for the inherited problems, to buy some time.

### **The USA in Afghanistan and Pakistan's intractable insurgency**

Now that the plan has succeeded, the coalition has already begun to unravel as US military pressure continues on the Afghan border, and the Supreme Court judges remain out of office. As the USA tries to decide whether Pakistan would be of greater benefit as an ally or an enemy, Pakistan's rulers have a delicate balance to strike if they want to stay in power. Musharraf's claim to competence was based on the fact that he managed the country and kept a relationship with the USA through an impossible situation. Pakistan's military strategy since its independence in 1947 has always been based primarily on the Indian threat and Kashmir. Pakistan's alliances with the United States and China were motivated by this consideration.

Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) are ethnically Pashtun, which is also the ethnicity of the largest number of Afghans. The border is porous and not really recognized by the people who live there. The state's relationship to NWFP has also been complex. The FATA area does not have provincial status and administration occurs through patron–client and negotiated relationships with local leaders. Throughout its history, Pakistan faced resentment from each subnational minority, all of whom resented domination by the Punjabi majority, whose elite is overrepresented in the military. One of the reasons that the military operations in the NWFP have been so unsuccessful is that Pashtuns in the

military do not see the logic of firing on their fellow Pashtuns, Pakistanis, Muslims, for the sake of a US war.

When the USSR invaded Afghanistan in 1979, these areas of Pakistan became the bases for a US-, Saudi- and Pakistani-sponsored war against the Soviets. This moment saw three important changes in Pakistan. First, control passed to Zia ul-Haq, Pakistan's worst military dictator, who 'Islamized' the military and attempted to 'Islamize' the other institutions of the country.<sup>3</sup> Second, the USSR presence in Afghanistan changed the US attitude towards Pakistan, including its nuclear programme, which the USA began to support covertly. Third, the most 'hands-on' role in organizing this war was taken on by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). After the USSR left in 1988, Pakistan maintained a very strong influence in Afghanistan, and was profoundly influenced in turn – by the small arms, narcotics economy, and militarism that are inevitably associated with covert operations, and by the Islamist ideology that was used to mobilize fighters from all over the world to come through Pakistan to join battle with the USSR. When veterans of these movements, angry with America's bases in Saudi Arabia, the destruction of Iraq and support for Israel, turned their guns on the USA and attacked New York in 2001, Pakistan was in a bind. Clients that it had once supported along with the USA were now in the gunsights of its ally. By providing the USA with help in the invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan was able to save its clients and its own personnel from destruction, as much of the Taliban and al-Qaeda crossed the border to Pakistan or went to ground and Afghanistan was taken over by US-friendly warlords. Musharraf paid a price for this, however, in assassination attempts and accusations of treason for supporting the USA against fellow Muslims in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

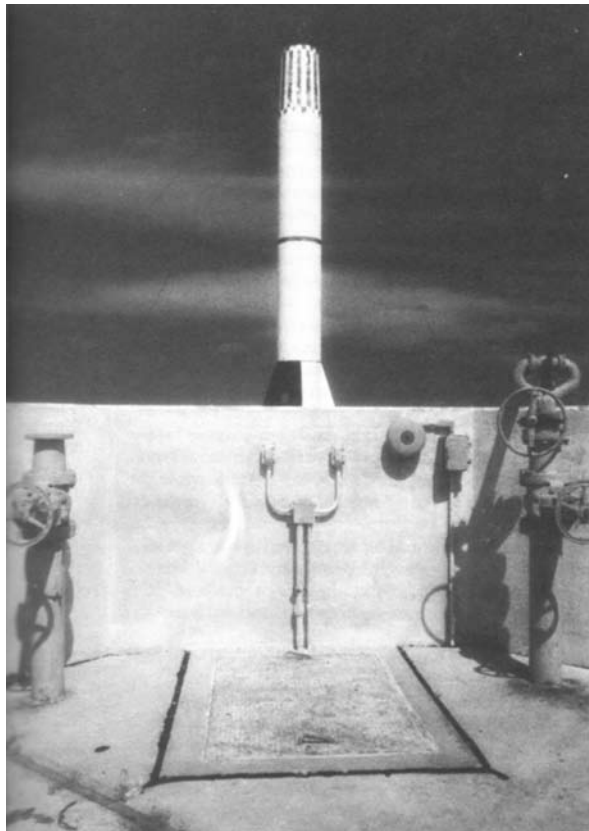
That tension has escalated continuously since 2001. Today, the USA and NATO demand that Pakistan take action against insurgents operating in NWFP and FATA. When Pakistan does so, its forces take casualties and it loses legitimacy in the region. When it provides passive or active support for the insurgents, as it has in the past, it is exposed to US threats (and its soldiers, sometimes, to US bombs). As the motives of the USA/NATO themselves seem increasingly confused or contradictory – is their aim to establish a long-term presence in the region? To watch and threaten Pakistan? To fight al-Qaeda and the Taliban? – parts of the countryside of Afghanistan and the NWFP and FATA have come under the control of the Taliban. While Pakistan's authorities promise to use their military to extend the 'writ of the state' in those areas, insurgency in both countries is growing in opposition to the extension of the writ of the wrong kind of state. The global and local balance of forces makes it virtually impossible for a state like Pakistan to deal with this kind of insurgency.

### **Counterinsurgency and the absence of the state**

As mentioned above, the FATA have no representative provincial administration: the central government rules through deals with local leaders. This hangover from the British Raj is a symptom of a colonial state, the operation of which has generated resistance in FATA, Baluchistan and Sindh over decades. The Taliban have flourished not just because of the NATO occupation of Afghanistan but also because of the absence of the state in the NWFP and FATA. People rely on the insurgency's sharia courts for justice, as even brutal justice fills a vacuum.

In other parts of Pakistan, the vacuum is filled in different ways. In Karachi, for example, there are reports of mob violence and lynching. The idea that the Taliban could take all of Pakistan is exaggerated. Despite its strength in NWFP and FATA, there are very different structures, elites, and power bases in Punjab, Sindh and Baluchistan. If NATO leaves and Afghanistan falls to the Taliban, the maximal scenario for Pakistan is probably a de facto Taliban-controlled NWFP and FATA. Deterioration of the state could also be blamed for the region's opium problem. Since 2001, there

have been periodic waves of stories about opium and its role in fuelling the insurgency in the West. But the idea of an ‘opium-fuelled insurgency’ can be deceptive. Today, the Afghan economy is dependent on poppy, which, according to the UN sociologist David Macdonald, supplies 60 per cent of Afghanistan’s GDP and employs 10 per cent of its people.<sup>4</sup> Everyone in the economy, from farmers to local warlords, from foreign intelligence agents to government officials, from the Taliban to probably NATO soldiers as well, are taking a piece. It is not just the insurgency that’s opium-fuelled, but the entire economy.



The narcotics trade provides resources for the insurgency to challenge the state. Meanwhile, the state, and specifically the military, is present in areas that are normally the preserve of the private sector. As Ayesha Siddiqi documents in her book *Military Inc.*, the military owns cornflakes, banks, real estate, cement, insurance, and many other industries.<sup>5</sup> This is far from the public ownership of socialist economics, as there is no national development project behind it. Indeed, transnational capital is encouraged to take its share as well, especially in resource-rich Baluchistan, where companies such as Canada’s Barrick Gold are signing contracts for exploration and mining. Military spending has also drawn resources away from development and investment in the national economy.

### **Government failures, ecological dangers**

Although Pakistan’s military business, or ‘Milbus’, structure is sometimes blamed for poor economic performance, the country has deeper structural economic and ecological problems exacerbated by the rise in energy prices and climate change.

Pakistan’s breadbasket is the Punjab, also the keystone site of the ‘Green Revolution’, in which modern chemical agriculture was adopted at the urging of Western planners and financiers. The Green Revolution is often presented as a tremendous advance, but some students of South Asian agriculture, like Vandana Shiva, Devinder Sharma and P. Sainath, have shown a less bright side to it – exhausted soil, people without work and no way to feed themselves, rural-to-urban migration, increased vulnerability to global commodity prices, and dependence on expensive inputs.

In 2008 Pakistan missed its cotton production target and had to import cotton to run its textile industry, significantly reducing its earnings of foreign exchange. Without much energy of its own (except for gas in Baluchistan), Pakistan needs this foreign exchange in order to buy ever-more-expensive energy. It is also importing food – milk, meat, vegetables, wheat, dry fruits, tea, spices, edible oil, sugar and pulses. Combined with global problems in the food system (see Raj Patel, ‘The Hungry of the Earth’ *RP* 151) and the supply of food to NATO in Afghanistan, Pakistan’s food security is in peril. The way in which the energy price shocks of the 1970s hurt the development of Third World countries that didn’t have their own oil resources is repeating itself today, combined this time with the perils of climate change. The Punjab’s water comes mainly from glacier-fed rivers, which, according to most scenarios, will dry up when the glaciers melt. These economic and ecological problems are a potent source of regional catastrophe, to which must be added the threat of nuclear destruction, derived from the rivalry with India.

## The weakness of the Left

Such converging crises ought to provide an opening for left politics. But secular left forces in Pakistan are isolated and precarious, and have to contend with forces of cooption that have become far stronger since the 1970s, especially NGOs. Critics of neoliberalism, privatization and militarism are present, but cannot find a foothold in the clientelistic structures of the main political parties. Some leftists work through the NGO sector, but the NGO structure has its own serious limitations, based as it is on foreign funding, often providing clientelistic services itself.

Some NGOs, like Roots for Equity, which works in villages in Sindh and NWFP, are aware of these limitations and use the structure anyway, as a basis for organizing and educating peasants about agrarian policy and problems. 'The only alternative would be to form a political party', argued Azra Talat Syed of Roots for Equity, 'and there are dozens of tiny left political parties with no following. When movements are strong enough, parties will emerge.'

Other grassroots groups such as the Rawalpindi-based People's Rights Movement (PRM) agitate and demonstrate on political issues, including support for the lawyers' movement and opposition to military operations in the NWFP and FATA. Aasim Sajjad Akhtar suggested that capacity was a problem for radical politics: 'the objective conditions for progressive politics are tremendous: all parties are not trusted and have fallen off the pedestal. We are growing but not fast enough. There is potential but we don't have the people to do the work.' Partly, PRM argued, the NGO sector was diverting people who would otherwise join movements. Partly, there has been a break in historical continuity, with missing generations of leftists and hence no one to work with younger people interested in radical politics due to decades of dictatorship. Socialism is often associated with atheism and, at worst, with the USSR and its invasion of Afghanistan.

Secular opposition groups do not take an anti-religious stand, but instead focus on economic and political issues without attacking the connection between religion and politics directly. To date, there has not been a movement that articulated opposition to the regime in religious terms. In Pakistan and India (as well as in Israel and the USA), religious symbols in politics are associated with the Right, although there are hints of attempts to challenge and contest right-wing politics and religion in Pakistan.

Despite its inability to offer development or democracy to most of its citizens, Pakistan's regime survives with help from the USA and through the absence of challengers in civil society strong enough to replace it. In relative terms, the military is still the supreme institution in the country. In the coming years the regime could easily find itself facing a hostile United States, and it might not survive such a contest. Many of the possible future scenarios are disastrous, but not all of them. Forces in play include those who mobilized to reinstate the judges, media that have had a taste of freedom, fledgling anti-imperialist movements for social justice, and activists working for dialogue and detente with India. When I was in the country in July, university students invited me to return in twenty years, when, they promised, democracy in Pakistan would be flourishing.

## Notes

1. Eqbal Ahmed, 'Pakistan – Signposts to a Police State', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, vol. IV, no. 4, 1974, republished in E. Ahmed, *Between Past and Future*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004.
2. Tariq Ali, 'Musharraf Will Be Gone in Days', *Guardian*, 14 August 2008, [www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/aug/14/pakistan.usa?gusrc=rss&feed=networkfront](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/aug/14/pakistan.usa?gusrc=rss&feed=networkfront).
3. An entertaining and well-informed version of Zia ul-Haq's last days is presented in Mohammed Hanif's 2008 novel *A Case of Exploding Mangoes*, Jonathan Cape, London.
4. David Mansfield, 'Drugs in Afghanistan', 2007, [www.davidmansfield.org](http://www.davidmansfield.org).
5. Ayesha Siddiqi, *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*, Pluto Press, London, 2007.