

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Taliban Expansion in Pakistan: The Buner District Falls to Militants

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Q1: How did the Buner District fall?

A1: On the evening of April 5, a group of heavily armed Taliban entered Buner District in the North-West Frontier from the neighboring Swat Valley. Something unusual happened; the locals attempted to resist. Several hundred residents took up positions with their own Kalashnikov rifles at a local police station in a desperate attempt to hold off the militants. During the standoff, local elders unsuccessfully attempted to negotiate the withdrawal of the Swat Taliban. By the end of the fighting, five locals were dead (three police and two volunteers), along with an unknown number of Taliban fighters.

The Taliban won and are now firmly in control of Buner District. Pickup trucks filled with heavily armed, black turbaned Takfiri roam the streets. Local religious leaders have disappeared—after fleeing or worse—and the Friday sermons are now being delivered by outsiders from Swat, preaching their version of Shari'a law, Islam, and anti-Westernism. The Takfiri have also posted signs banning women from the market and closed down “un-Islamic” centers, such as barbershops and schools. There have also been reports that the Swat Taliban have already begun a rapid recruitment drive for new fighters in Buner.

Q2: What are the implications of the “fall of Buner”?

A2: There are four major implications. 1) *Failure of “negotiations”*: The government claims that the move breaks the recently signed peace agreement between Islamabad and the Swat Taliban. The invasion of Buner District reveals that the Taliban seeks to expand its control (through the rest of the Malakand Division). 2) *Threat to the capital*: Buner District is only 60 miles (96 km) from Islamabad, and concern is growing over the proximity of the Taliban-controlled areas to the center of governmental authority. 3) *Impotence of Pakistani security forces*: Besides the local resistance and a small number of police, sources from Pakistan have reported that the Pakistani army put up no resistance to the Swat Taliban's invasion of Buner. Instead of flooding the province with personnel, Islamabad stood aloof, largely rendering it irrelevant to events. It is foreseeable that Islamabad's commitment and capabilities will now come under greater question by the population. 4) *Unattractiveness of the Taliban ideology*: The episode further highlights the Taliban's lack of appeal among the general population. The local people in Buner had been petitioning the Awami National Party, which (officially) rules the North-West Frontier Province, for the introduction of Shari'a law as a substitute for Islamabad's inefficient and frequently corrupt legal system. However, the strict and brutal form of Shari'a law practiced by the Taliban has no appeal for the people of Buner, which is evident by their resistance to the outsiders.

Q3: What will happen next?

A3: The Pakistani government is now in a fix. Negotiating with the Taliban has been unsuccessful. Previous military actions have been ineffective and, indeed, have strengthened the Taliban through two mechanisms. First, military operations in the North-West Frontier Province have resulted in the destruction of civilian homes, which has resulted in public resentment. When their villages come under attack, tribal *laskars* fight alongside the Taliban. Second, the failure of these operations to reimpose Islamabad's authority has meant that people are increasingly viewing the Taliban as the likely victors. Not responding to the fall of Buner is not an option. The Taliban have already started digging trenches and setting up bunkers on heights in strategic towns, such as Gadezi, Salarzai, and Osherai. The longer Islamabad waits, the more entrenched the Taliban becomes.

The first step for Islamabad must be containment. The Taliban may now have their sights on Buner's neighboring districts of Haripur (to the southeast), Mansehra (to the east), and Mardan (to the west). Although these districts are unlikely to fall until the Taliban consolidates its control over Buner, their fall would be a disaster for Islamabad. Besides the political and military impact of additional districts falling to the Taliban, it would place the Taliban in control of the Karakoram Highway, which is Pakistan's only link to China (one of its main trading partners). The Pakistani government must reinforce these provinces with police, army, and intelligence personnel. Once there, the police and intelligence personnel

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must begin to undermine the Taliban’s authority in Buner by beginning clandestine dialogues with those (few) local leaders that have remained. The locals alone will be able to point out the Takfiri militants to the police and security forces, but they will only do so when convinced of Islamabad’s long-term commitment to their safety and security.

Buner District

Population: 506,048 (according to the 1998 census)

Area: 1,865 sq km



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