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Pakistan: Struggling Through the Perfect Storm

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The attack on the authority of the Pakistani state that is being played out on the front pages of today's newspapers has been building up for the better part of a decade. Reestablishing a stronger political and state structure is possible, but becomes more difficult each time the state appears to cede control to the insurgents. The U.S. strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan acknowledges the central importance of strengthening the Pakistani state. In practice, the United States has only indirect influence over the key ingredient in such an effort—the determination of Pakistan's leaders and the effectiveness of its basic government institutions.

Mounting violence: Political violence has been a staple of Pakistani life, especially since 9/11. Anti-Shi'a attacks, fomented by organizations like the Sipah e-Sahaba, with a harsh sectarian agenda, have taken place all over the country, with mosques and individual Shi'a professionals as important targets. Anti-Western attacks were also prominent, such as the bombing of an Islamabad church that led to the death of a U.S. aid official and her daughter.

The state itself under attack: Political violence had morphed into an attack on the institutions of the state by 2007, when students and clerics from the Red Mosque in Islamabad began taking the law into their own hands, amassing an arsenal and kidnapping people off the streets in an effort to stamp out behavior that they considered immoral. After some six months of activism from the mosque, then-President Pervez Musharraf sent in the army. The resulting operation cleaned out the mosque but left between 100 and 200 people dead. By the time it took place, Musharraf was well into the political crisis that eventually drove him from office. The event no doubt serves as an object lesson to future politicians, illustrating both the danger of allowing an illegal arms supply to accumulate with impunity and, more ominously, the political risks involved in confronting a group that billed itself as the representative of Islam.

The year 2007 set a record for political violence, and 2008 set another. Much of this bloodshed was directed against the army, with military installations in both Punjab and the North-West Frontier Province being attacked by suicide bombers. Thus far in 2009, there have been fewer attacks on military targets, but the state is still a target, as in the attack on the police training academy in Lahore in March.

The border areas and Swat: Meanwhile, the Pakistani Taliban movement had become active in two areas in particular. In 2002, under heavy U.S. pressure, the Pakistan Army moved into Waziristan, in the tribal areas along the Afghan border, in an effort to assert its control at the border and integrate this largely ungoverned area into Pakistan. The intervention ended badly for everyone. The army lost between 800 and 1000 people. Intermittent fighting and negotiations ultimately led to an agreement in 2006 under which the government in practice allowed militant groups to exercise state-like authority.

The next flash point was Swat, a scenic valley that was a largely self-governing feudal princely state until 1969. As early as 2001, a firebrand cleric named Sufi Mohammed was sending untrained and barely armed young men from Swat into Afghanistan to support the Taliban. The emergence in 2007 of an insurgency promising speedy Islamic justice, attacking officials and police, and broadcasting vitriolic messages on an FM station owned by Sufi Mohammed's son-in-law, turned this situation into brazen defiance of the authority of the state. Musharraf sent in the army during his brief period of emergency rule in late 2007. The army withdrew, saying it had removed the insurgents. By mid-2008, the insurgency was back, those who had helped the army were being targeted for assassination, and girls' schools were being burned down. The army returned in 2008.

The "Swat Deal": This was the backdrop for the agreement announced in February 2009. The government was to establish an Islamic system of justice—"Nizam-e-Adl," the term used when the deal was ratified by the Pakistani parliament. Sufi Mohammed and the Pakistani Taliban were to lay down arms, at least in Swat. The government assured

the country and the world that this agreement would give the people of Swat the speedy justice for which they longed and that the governing arrangements would not change. Following a public dispute over what was meant by Islamic justice and especially over who would control judicial appointments and the appellate process, the government and the Pakistani Taliban accused each other of violating the agreement. The standoff remained—and so did the Pakistani Taliban's control of Swat.

The danger is rot, not military movements: In April 2009, the next shoe fell: the Pakistani Taliban announced that they had taken over Buner, the district immediately south of Swat. The next day, the newspapers reported that the Pakistani Taliban had left Buner—but the reality was murky. An intimidation campaign was well under way in Buner, and those who had been carrying it out were still around. Fighting has continued. One of the Pakistani newspapers tantalizingly reported that ISI (Inter Services Intelligence, Pakistan's principal intelligence agency) requested the Pakistani Taliban to withdraw.

The Western press, in covering these events, stressed that Buner is only 60 miles from Islamabad. But this misinterprets the nature of these developments. The danger stems not from proximity but from the appearance of the government ceding authority.

Swat and Buner are both Pashtun areas, within the North-West Frontier Province. But this is not a strictly Pashtun phenomenon. Balochistan, Pakistan's largest province and the only one with significant mineral resources, is chronically in opposition to the government in Islamabad and has been home to a series of insurgencies stretching back at least three decades. It also has an uncontrolled border with Afghanistan.

More importantly, many observers believe that another vulnerable area is in the southern part of Punjab, the province that has always dominated Pakistan's politics and army. Huge income disparities between the largely Shi'a landholders and the predominantly Sunni peasants, and a history of sectarian and fundamentalist activism, make this a potential target for a similar assertion of control outside the framework of the state. The governmental structure is more robust in Punjab than in the North-West Frontier Province or Balochistan, and the current provincial chief minister is far more assertive. But the phenomenon of eroding state authority is not ethnically determined.

The government's response: The elected government that took office in March 2008 has concentrated on consolidating its political base, and part of that process has involved establishing a new pattern for dealing with both Afghanistan and the domestic insurgency. They stressed negotiation, not military action, and wanted above all to avoid any appearance of U.S. involvement in their approach to the domestic insurgency. More importantly, the national leadership had its mind elsewhere—on the domestic political maneuvering between the Pakistan People's Party, which soon became the only major party in the central government, and its opponents, especially former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and his branch of the Pakistan Muslim League. The initial negotiating efforts in Swat and other parts of the North-West Frontier Province, spearheaded by the provincial government, accomplished little.

A winning strategy needed a multipronged approach, including not only negotiations, but also an energetic response from the government administration and a high level of attention from the national political leadership. This civilian response—policing, delivering normal government services, economic support—has not been a strength of the Pakistani government for some time. It was found wanting in the case of Swat; worse, the local intimidation campaign also frightened those who would need to deliver the government's civilian response.

This does not mean that the Pakistan government has lost the ability to administer territory and deliver services. But its inability to move into beleaguered parts of the country reinforces doubts about its competence. Taken together with intimidation by a determined insurgent group, each area where the government's writ does not run makes the next such episode easier.

The army: In the face of armed insurgents, a military response was needed as well. Both Musharraf's government and the subsequent elected government have used the army. Until recently, however, counterinsurgency has been a stepchild among military specialties, relegated to the paramilitary Frontier Corps. The military's response was not as effective as it might have been, and in any case, its success ultimately depended on a strong response from the civilian arm of the government.

More disturbingly, however, the army seems ambivalent about where counterinsurgency operations fit into its priorities. The army's security outlook is centered on the threat from India; counterinsurgency near the Afghan border may seem peripheral to the threats for which the army has trained. Recent operations in the tribal areas did not enhance either the army's reputation or its confidence. Taken together with a natural reluctance to take up arms against Pakistanis, all these factors may have made it hesitate to risk further damage to the army's standing in an unpopular operation whose success was by no means assured.

The popular and political response: How have Pakistan's major politicians and the population reacted to these dramatic events? The evidence is contradictory. Polling data show little popular support for military action against militants who profess to speak for Islam, and anecdotal information suggests that such action is conflated in many people's minds with the deeply unpopular "America's war" next door in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Pakistani media coverage of recent events in Swat and Buner portrays a population terrorized by the insurgents' intimidation campaign and that desperately wants the government to restore a kind of order that permits women and girls to go about their normal lives without Taliban-like strictures. Polling on attitudes toward the militant groups is contradictory, and probably not very reliable. Nawaz Sharif, an astute politician with a long track record of accurately gauging the popular mood, announced in late April that the parliament ought to reexamine the Swat agreement. He may believe the popular mood has swung away from the insurgents—and that he can safely acknowledge this in public.

High stakes for Washington: On March 27, the Obama administration announced its new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. The policy framework and the importance it attaches to this region have not changed dramatically from the previous administration. One new feature, however, is the implicit acknowledgment that Pakistan is the more strategically important of those two countries. The strategy and President Barack Obama's speech announcing it make clear that the United States has a fundamental interest in the maintenance and strengthening of the integrity of the Pakistani state.

Some aspects of the administration's approach to Pakistan are clear, such as its support for a sharp increase in economic assistance. Others are still on the drawing boards. Support for Pakistan's beleaguered police, a continuing strong military-to-military relationship with the army, intense high-level consultations including the leadership of Afghanistan, and political outreach to all corners of Pakistan's political spectrum will be part of the mix. The most important ingredients in a strategy to bring Pakistan back from the brink, however, are ones that the United States can only indirectly influence: leadership and determination at the top, and intense ground-level attention to parts of the country that might be in danger of becoming the "next Swat."

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