



**PAKISTAN**  
FROM AYESHA SIDDIQA IN ISLAMABAD

# Between Military

**It is often suggested that the Pakistan military still retains links to the Taliban in Afghanistan and sympathy with religious extremists. Senior western leaders constantly encourage a tougher line. But although ties have not been cut, economic incentives ensure military loyalty to the Islamabad government. The real question is whether those in command are able to think through the dangerous long-term implications for their country.**

**T**HE UNITED STATES VICE-PRESIDENT DICK CHENEY made a surprise visit to Islamabad at the end of February to ensure that Pakistan accepted the American agenda of the 'war' on terror and communicate Washington's disappointment with its ally's performance in fighting Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Cheney's visit followed one by US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. Both were prompted by General Pervez Musharraf's statement earlier in the month stating that Pakistan had done enough and that it was not his country's sole responsibility to counter terrorism in the areas bordering Afghanistan.

President Musharraf's comments were in response to mounting pressure from Washington to increase the military crackdown on the Taliban in the tribal areas. In January, the US House of Representatives adopted a bill making military aid to Pakistan conditional on President George Bush certifying Islamabad's cooperation in preventing the Taliban operating in areas under its sovereign control. This legislation implemented the recommendations of the 9/11 Commission.

## **Risking Unpopularity**

Interestingly, Cheney's visit was soon followed by the reported arrest of a top Taliban leader, Mullah Obaidullah Akhund, who was apparently caught by Pakistani forces. Although such action brings accolades from Washington for



# and Militants

Pakistan's military regime, it also raises questions about the will to crackdown on the Taliban. Islamabad claims it cannot do this because of internal pressures.

In early March, Pakistan's ambassador to the US retired Major General Mehmood Durrani said that additional pressure from America and insistence on hot pursuit are likely to destabilise the Musharraf regime. Allowing American and NATO forces to operate in Pakistan runs the risk of making the President unpopular within the army, which is already unhappy with his tilt towards the US. Officers, especially at the junior and mid-ranking levels, who generally appreciate his strong and macho image, are discontented when they see him bow to foreign pressure.

While Washington occasionally pats the President on the back for his cooperation, there are many who believe that the army and its premier intelligence agency, the ISI, is part of the problem as well as the solution. On one occasion Musharraf admitted the involvement of retired ISI officials with the Taliban. However, at other times he has impressed on the west the necessity to cooperate with the intelligence agency if the Taliban is to be defeated. So what should be made of this?

## Hostility at Home

Pakistan's contention is that it is doing its best in fighting the war on terror and that it is itself a victim of terrorism. A few months ago, about 21 soldiers died during a suicide attack on a

training camp in the frontier province. In January, there were two suicide attacks in Islamabad with a third in the city of Peshawar. It is believed these are the work of pro-Taliban elements from South Waziristan who are well-trained, fairly well equipped and strongly determined to fight the US and any of its regional or extra-regional allies.

Army movements in Waziristan are generally restricted to its cantonment because of hostile forces. A number of helicopters have been shot down in the past year, forcing commanders to adopt tactics such as coordinating flight schedules with prayer times when militants are less likely to attack them.

Militant action has also spread to other cities including Quetta. The situation seems to have worsened despite the peace agreement with tribal warlords in North Waziristan, which is much debated in the west; a popular view is that such agreements give breathing space to the Taliban.

The government, however, argues that the agreement has brought down the level of violence in North Waziristan and the current spate of attacks involves South Waziristan where a similar deal was not possible. There are a range of reasons for the lack of a second agreement, including the number of tribal warriors. Two ceasefires signed separately with Naik Mohammad in May 2004 and Baitullah Mehsud a

**DR AYESHA SIDDIQA** is author of *Militants Inc. Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*, to be published this month by Pluto Press.

year later, broke down because of military operations in Bajaur last October and in Hamzola in December.

Some sources are also of the view that the South remains less controllable because of the military's continued links with pro-Taliban warlords such as Baitullah Mehsud and Abdullah Mehsud. The former promptly agreed to abide by the ceasefire agreement soon after the arrest of Mullah Akhund, raising further questions about the army's links with pro-Taliban forces.

## Under Siege

The threat posed by jihadis is in addition to rising religious extremism in other parts of the country which also challenges the state. The power of religious zealots is apparent from the siege of the children's library in Islamabad which was forcibly taken over on January 21, mainly by female students of the Hafsah madrassah or religious seminary. These teenager girls and their male protectors challenged the state by guarding the mosque and madrassah which the government had planned to demolish because they were illegally constructed.

The sight of men armed with AK-47s and young women occupying the nearby children's library was terrifying. Their demand is more than the reversal of a decision, they insist on the imposition of sharia law and aim to provoke the government into taking action.

According to one female student, 'we want them to kill us so that when we become shaheed (martyrs) our families in the frontier province and tribal areas will wage a war against this un-Islamic government'.

The authorities had to back off for fear of the severe repercussions of any police or military action. Reports indicate that Musharraf even suggested an air strike, a proposal which was rejected by his commanders on the grounds that such severe action was unimaginable in a populated area.

The reaction of the people was a matter of greater concern, especially in the neighbourhood around the mosque. They threatened to come out in protest if the government used force. The military decision exposed its fear of the extremists. However, there has been little thought about the policy which has encouraged militancy for more than two decades.

## Few Extremists

The air force commander's rejection of an air strike was interpreted by some as showing sympathy for extremist and militant elements. This echoes a popular perception in certain quarters that there are extremist elements in the military who could hijack the state once Musharraf goes. But extremism in the army is a misperception.

Although there is a small group of military people who subscribe to the Tableeghi Jamaat, which preaches Islam and is highly conservative in its views, the bulk of the officer cadre is not fundamentalist. This is despite the fact that the regime has, at times, deliberately propagated the theory of an extremist presence in the higher ranks of the army. But then why is this perception false? There are three reasons for this.

First, sympathy of officers for extremist elements experienced a major setback after the beginning of the internal war in the tribal areas. The army was ordered into Waziristan in 2002 when it took command of all security infrastructure, including the Frontier Constabulary para-military force.

Militants attacked the army but this was considered an attack on the institution itself. The armed forces, known for their organisational cohesion and corporate character, respond collectively against domestic and

external threats, including what they saw as threats from civilian politicians and civil society in general.

There were reports of indiscipline and court martials of officers who refused to fight in the tribal areas. But such indiscipline was mainly in the Frontier Constabulary. Sources claim that about two of its battalions refused to fight the Taliban and their sympathisers. After this the army decided on secret operational planning which was not shared with the para-military or any other non-military agency. The success of army operations now depends on the level of secrecy, since it is feared pro-Taliban elements have penetrated the Frontier Constabulary and the local police.

## Jobs for the Boys

The present regime has successfully managed to clean the army of religiously motivated officers, current senior generals are not ideologues.

Economic tools were used to cleanse the extremists. The military is known for an unwritten and informal social contract between top management and the rest of the officer cadre. Rewards, such as urban and rural land, jobs in the corporate sector, the government, and other post-retirement opportunities are central to the patron-client relationship in the armed forces. Musharraf's regime has out-performed previous military governments in involving the military, serving and retired, in all facets of the state and society. Senior and mid-ranking officers hold positions in all important government departments.

The government has also created financial stakes for lower-ranking officers and soldiers, giving them jobs, providing other opportunities and rewards, and protecting them against pressures from civil society. An officer is likely to be rewarded with a piece of land after five years of service.

Reports suggest Musharraf defended a senior general who had slapped a police officer quarrelling with the general's driver over a traffic violation. He is also said to have gone out of his way to defend an army captain accused of raping a female doctor working for the government in Baluchistan. While this could be perceived as disregard for the rule of law, such attitudes strengthen the President's influence over all military behaviour. The simple message is that benefits will be provided as long as personnel show their commitment to the top leadership. Religious ideology or any other motivations are secondary.

## Fuzzy

The army's strategic thinking about the Taliban is more doubtful. Uncertain about how long the NATO force will stay in Afghanistan and concerned about India's growing foothold, the Pakistani military is not eager to cut all links with major players there. What would happen if NATO forces became exhausted and left?

There is pessimism about the west's appreciation of Pakistan's strategic situation and America's engagement with it. Although awarded the status of special ally by Washington, the majority of military personnel have little faith in the sustainability of US-Pakistan relations. It is popularly believed that the US will abandon Pakistan once its objectives in Afghanistan are fulfilled, or it gets hold of Osama bin Laden.

Military policy towards the Taliban and militancy in general remains fuzzy. While the army continues to support American objectives in the war on terror, there has been no strategic shift to totally abandon militants and militancy. What this means for Pakistan's future requires analysis and introspection, something the army might not be capable of.

