

Pakistan Security Research Unit (PSRU)

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Pakistan – The Threat From Within

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Pakistan – The Threat From Within

Pervez Hoodbhoy¹

Twenty five years ago the Pakistani state pushed Islam on to its people as a matter of policy. Prayers in government departments were deemed compulsory, punishments were meted out to those who did not fast in Ramadan, selection for academic posts required that the candidate demonstrate knowledge of Islamic teachings, and jihad was propagated through schoolbooks. Today government intervention is no longer needed because of a spontaneous groundswell of Islamic zeal. The notion of an Islamic state – as yet in some amorphous and diffuse form – is more popular today across Pakistan than in previous decades. Across the country there has been a spectacular increase in the power and prestige of the clerics, attendance in mosques, home prayer meetings (*dars* and *zikr*), observance of special religious festivals, and fasting during Ramadan.

But the state is now beginning to fear its own success as it comes under attack from religious militants and rival Islamic groups battle each other with heavy weapons. Even the Pakistan Army – whose men were recruited under the banner of jihad and which saw itself as the fighting arm of Islam – is now frequently targeted by suicide bombers. It has lost hundreds of men fighting Al-Qaida and the Taliban. Old recruiting slogans have been jettisoned, and bearded army officers are losing out in promotions.

The current official position taken by the government of Pakistan under President General Pervez Musharraf is that it has rejected the orthodox, militant, violent Islam imposed by the previous chief of army staff, General Zia-ul-Haq (who ruled from 1977-1988), in favour of a more ‘modern’ and ‘moderate’ Islam. But Musharraf’s actions, and those of his government and its allies, are often at odds with this stated policy. In fact, after eight years of Musharraf’s “enlightened moderation”, it seems there is more continuity than change. And, with each passing day, it becomes harder to see how such a policy can hope to stem the tide of religious radicalism that is overwhelming Pakistani society.

The pace of radicalization has quickened. In the first half of 2007 there were about two dozen suicide attacks, a phenomenon that was almost unknown in Pakistan before the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. These have occurred in major cities as well as tribal areas. The targets have been the Pakistan army, police, incumbent government leaders, and rival Islamic sects. But this is just the tip of the iceberg.

Pakistan’s tribal areas have undergone a radical transformation. The local Taliban have closed all girls schools and are enforcing Sharia laws in the areas under their control. Barbers have been handed 6-foot long death shrouds – shave and die. Taliban vigilante groups patrol the streets of Miramshah town checking, among other things, the length of beards, whether the “shalwars” are worn at an appropriate height above the ankles, and attendance of individuals in the mosques. A new breed of young

¹ The author teaches at Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad. Pictures are courtesy of Ishaque Choudhury. The views expressed are entirely those of Pervez Hoodbhoy and should not be construed as reflecting the views of the PSRU, Department of Peace Studies or the University of Bradford.

militants, trained in madrassas, now call the shots. They have displaced the leadership of the traditional village elders, the *maliks*.

The neo-Taliban have an agenda informed by a peculiar mixture of religion and tribal values. They demand that all TV sets be destroyed. Polio vaccination has been declared *haram* by the ulema, including the influential Maulana Fazalullah of Mingora, because it would allegedly render the new generation impotent. Consequently health workers are being targeted for assassination. After a doctor from the Frontier Medical College administering polio shots to children was shot dead in March 2007, pressure resulted in the resignation of 70 female workers of a health organization working in the FATA region. Over 4000 parents have refused to get their children inoculated and the government has essentially abandoned the polio elimination campaign.

Sectarian killings are on the rise. An unidentified suicide bomber killed 57 people and eliminated the entire leadership of the “Sunni Movement” when he leapt on to the stage at a religious gathering in Karachi in April, 2006. Months earlier, barely a mile down from my university, at the shrine of Bari Imam, 25 Shias were killed in similar attack. In the tribal areas, sectarian tensions have frequently exploded into open warfare: in the villages of Hangu district, Sunnis and Shias exchanged light artillery and rocket fire leaving scores dead. Sectarian clashes erupted again in Parachinar and Dera Ismail Khan in April 2007, with mortars and rockets freely used by both sides. In May 2007, fierce armed battles broke out between the Ansar-ul-Islam and Lashkar-e-Islam groups in Bara, while Tank and Mingora saw bloody clashes with the Frontier Constabulary.

The intensification of religious feelings has had many consequences, the most important of which is depoliticization and demobilization of Pakistan’s people. The single exception is the large public participation in protesting the dismissal of the chief justice of Pakistan by General Musharraf on March 8, 2007. But, on every other matter, the destruction of most non-religious organizations, such as student unions and trade unions, has killed public expression. This includes action on even specific Muslim causes like US actions against Iraq, Palestine, or Iran. In the absence of political organizations, only a few dozen protesters have ventured on to the streets. Nevertheless large numbers of Pakistanis are driven to fury and violence when they perceive their faith has been maligned. Mobs set on fire the Punjab Assembly, as well as shops and cars in Lahore, for an act of blasphemy committed in Denmark. Even as religious fanaticism grips the population there is a curious, almost fatalistic, disconnection with the real world which suggests that fellow Muslims don’t matter any more – only the Faith does.

The Talibanization of Pakistan’s tribal areas has caused alarm, but it is the rapid developments in the heart of the nation’s capital, Islamabad, that have stunned many.

Islamabad Under Mullah Terror

Since Jan 21, 2007, vigilante groups from a government funded mosque in Islamabad, the *Lal Masjid*, have roamed the streets and bazaars as they impose Islamic morality and terrorize citizens in full view of the police. Openly sympathetic to the Taliban and tribal militants fighting the Pakistan army, the two cleric brothers who head Lal

Masjid, Maulana Abdul Aziz and Maulana Abdur Rashid Ghazi, have attracted a core of banned militant organizations around them. These include the Jaish-e-Muhammad, considered to be the pioneer of suicide bombings in the region.

The clerics openly defy the state. Baton wielding burqa-clad students of the *Jamia Hafsa*, the women's Islamic university located next to Lal Masjid, have forcibly occupied a government building, the Children's Library. In one of their many forays outside the seminary, this burqa brigade swooped upon a house, which they claimed was a brothel, and kidnapped 3 women and a baby.



Students of Jamia Hafsa (Women's University) in Islamabad demonstrate for Shariah law.



Victory for the Burqa Brigade

The male students of Islamabad's many madrassas are even more active. They terrorize video shop owners, who they accuse of spreading pornography and vice. Newspapers have carried pictures of grand bonfires made with seized cassettes and CDs. Most video stores in Islamabad have now closed down. Their owners duly repented after a fresh campaign by militants on May 4 bombed a dozen music and video stores, barber shops and a girls school in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP).



Enjoying video burnings in Islamabad

The Pakistani state has shown astonishing patience. It showed its displeasure in Karachi on May 12, 2007 with bullets while trying to prevent the chief justice of Pakistan from addressing a meeting. Others it disagrees with, as in Balochistan, have been hit with air and artillery power. But the Lal Masjid clerics operate with impunity. No attempt has been made to cut off their electricity, gas, phone, or website – or even to shut down their illegal FM radio station. The chief negotiator appointed by Musharraf, Chaudhry Shujaat Husain, described the burqa brigade kidnapers as “our daughters”, with whom negotiations would continue and against whom “no operation could be contemplated”.

Soon after they went on the warpath, the clerics realized that the government wanted to play ball. Their initial demand – the rebuilding of 8 illegally constructed mosques that had been knocked down by Islamabad's civic administration – transformed into a demand for enforcing the Shariah in Pakistan. At a meeting held in the mosque on April 6, over 100 guest religious leaders from across the country pledged to die for the cause of Islam and Shariah. On April 12, in an FM broadcast from the Lal Masjid's illegal FM station, the clerics issued a threat: “*There will be suicide blasts in the nook*

and cranny of the country. We have weapons, grenades and we are expert in manufacturing bombs. We are not afraid of death....”²



Confronting the state – with the state’s connivance

The Lal Masjid head cleric, a former student of my university in Islamabad, added the following chilling message for our women students in the same broadcast:

The government should abolish co-education. Quaid-e-Azam University has become a brothel. Its female professors and students roam in objectionable dresses. I think I will have to send my daughters of Jamia Hafsa to these immoral women. They will have to hide themselves in hijab otherwise they will be punished according to Islam.... Our female students have not issued the threat of throwing acid on the uncovered faces of women. However, such a threat could be used for creating the fear of Islam among sinful women. There is no harm in it. There are far more horrible punishments in the hereafter for such women³.

If the truth be told, QAU resembles a city of walking double-holed tents rather than the brothel of a sick mullah’s imagination. The last few bare-faced women are finding it more difficult by the day to resist. But then, that is precisely the aim of the Islamists. On May 7, a female teacher in the QAU history department was physically assaulted in her office by a bearded, Taliban-looking man who screamed that he had instructions from Allah. It is unknown, however, whether there was a direct link to the Lal Masjid threats. President Musharraf – who is the chancellor of QAU and often chooses to be involved in rather petty university administrative affairs – has made no comment on the recent developments.

On May 18, the al Masjid Brigade – as they have come to be known now – kidnapped four policemen, two of whom were released in exchange for grant of bail to five Lal Masjid students. As police gathered outside the mosque, students of Lal

² Editorial, The News, Islamabad, April 24, 2007.

³ Ibid.

Masjid and Jamia Hafsa also put up a show of strength and dug trenches. Talking to newsmen, Maulana Ghazi ‘flatly’ refused to continue talks and said that his people reserved the option of launching countrywide suicide attacks if any operation was launched against them.

What next? As Islamabad heads the way of Pakistan’s tribal towns, the next targets will be girls schools, internet cafes, bookshops and western clothing stores, followed by shops selling toilet paper, tampons, underwear, mannequins, and other un-Islamic goods.

In a sense, the inevitable is coming to pass. Until a few years ago, Islamabad was a quiet, orderly, modern city different from all others in Pakistan. Still earlier it was largely the abode of Pakistan’s hyper-elite and foreign diplomats. But the rapid transformation of its demography brought with it hundreds of mosques with multi-barrelled audio-cannons mounted on minarets, as well as scores of madrassas illegally constructed in what used to be public parks and green areas. Now, tens of thousands of their students with little prayer caps dutifully chant the Quran all day. In the evenings they roam in packs through the city’s streets and bazaars, gaping at store windows and lustfully ogling bare-faced women.

The stage for transforming Islamabad into a Taliban stronghold is being set. If at all it is to be prevented, resolute opposition from its citizens will be needed to prevent more Lal Masjids from creating their own shariah squads.



Victory for the virtuous

Pampering Fanatics – Why?

The changes in Islamabad, while surprising, nevertheless betray an unmistakable continuity. Military generals and fanatical clerics have been symbiotically linked in Pakistan’s politics for decades. They have often needed and helped the other attain their respective goals. And it is possible that they may soon need each other again – this time to set Islamabad ablaze.

Why so? Beset by nation-wide protests against his dismissal of the chief justice of Pakistan, Musharraf is now a desperate man willing to use all available means, including extremists of all kinds, to help him survive the challenge to his rule. After he gave the green light to the Muttaheda Qaumi Mahaz (MQM), an ethno-fascist political party that supports him, it initiated a horrific carnage on May 12, 2007 that led to the death of dozens of protesters.

Given this background, a plausible explanation emerges for allowing the rampage to continue through Islamabad for months: the Lal Masjid extremist monster, and others like it around the country, are certain to grow too big and will then need to be killed. No force except for the Pakistan Army can conceivably do this. An engineered

bloodbath that leads to the army's intervention, and the declaration of a national emergency, could serve as excellent reason for postponing the October 2007 elections. Although Musharraf denies that he wants a postponement, a lengthy martial law may now be his only chance for a continuation of his dictatorial rule into its eighth year – and perhaps beyond.

This perverse strategy sounds almost unbelievable. A man who President George W. Bush describes as his “buddy” in the war against terror, and the celebrated author of an “enlightened moderate” version of Islam, Musharraf wears the two close assassination attempts on his life by religious extremists as a badge of honour. During his roaring three-week visit [to the US] in September 2006, he received standing ovations from audiences at, among others, the Council for Foreign Relations and Columbia University. He appeared before a comedy television show, and took an entourage of 70 loyal followers for a lavish tour around the US to promote his memoir, “In the Line of Fire”.

An obviously secular general with aspirations to international stature for advocating a peaceful Islam would, it seems, have no truck with extremists. But Musharraf has long been accused of leading a double life. Indeed, his secret reliance upon the Taliban card – one that he has been accused of playing for years – increases as his authority and judgment weakens. But is he actually complicit in allowing religious terrorism to spread? Or merely weak and confused? In the following we shall inspect Musharraf's much publicized “enlightened moderation” in order to judge the level of commitment behind his agenda of social reform.

Enlightened Moderation – The Track Record

No one doubts that there have been some changes for the good. There is a perceptible shift in institutional practices and inclinations. Heads of government organizations are no longer required to lead noon prayers as in the 1980's; female announcers with undraped heads freely appear on Pakistan Television; to the relief of many passengers thickly bearded stewards are disappearing from PIA flights; the first women fighter pilots have been inducted into the Pakistan Air Force; although it exercises great self-censorship the media is allowed to discuss some controversial issues; and criticism of the government (but not the army) is permitted in small doses. A vastly overdue – but nevertheless welcome – action was taken by the government when it released in July 2006 hundreds of women prisoners arrested under the Hudood Ordinance for fornication, many of whom had spent years awaiting their trial.

But the force of these pluses cannot outweigh the many more weighty minuses, nor suppress the rising tide of religious fanaticism across the length and breadth of Pakistan. Secretly encouraging radicalism, while routinely denying that it is doing so, has been a consistent feature of the Establishment's practice.

Jihadist groups have long operated with the state's knowledge and support. Many such groups, trained and armed by the Pakistan Army for over two decades, had been formally banned under pressure from the US. But only hours after the killer October 2005 earthquake, members of extremist groups in Kashmir – which had officially ceased to exist after the General's famous speech of 12 January, 2002 – were pulling people out from under the rubble and taking them to their own hospitals. They earned

gratitude all around for their relief work, and this enabled the jihadists to fully reestablish and even expand the scale of their organizations. On the other hand, the Pakistan Army – for all its heavy presence in the area – was nowhere to be seen for days. Jihadist groups continued to openly flaunt their banners and weapons in all major towns of Azad Kashmir. Hafiz Saeed, the head of the *Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* and its post-ban reincarnation, *Jamat-ud-Dawa*, demanded that the government hand over all relief responsibilities to his group since they were doing a much better job. Indeed, some extremist groups obtained relief materials from government stocks to pass off as their own, and used heavy vehicles that could only have been provided by the authorities. Many national and international relief organizations were left insecure by their overwhelming presence. It took over many months for the jihadists to move out of full public view into more sheltered places.

Although he has been decorated as an SSG commando for combat bravery, General Musharraf’s courage consistently fails when it comes to confronting mullahs. On 21st April 2000, Musharraf had announced a new administrative procedure for registration of cases under the Blasphemy Law 295-C. This law, under which the minimum penalty is death, has frequently been used to harass personal and political opponents. To reduce such occurrences, Musharraf’s modified procedure would have required authorization from the local district magistrate for registration of a blasphemy case. It would have been an improvement, albeit a modest one. But 25 days later – on the 16th of May 2000 – under the watchful glare of the mullahs, Musharraf hastily climbed down: *“As it was the unanimous demand of the ulema, mashaikh and the people, therefore, I have decided to do away with the procedural change in the registration of FIR under the Blasphemy Law”*.⁴

Musharraf’s courage again failed in October 2004, just as a new system for issuing machine readable passports was being installed. In keeping with international practices, the government had declared that henceforth it would not be necessary for passport holders to specify their religion. Expectedly this was denounced by the Islamic parties as a grand conspiracy aimed at secularizing Pakistan and destroying its Islamic character. But even before the mullahs actually took to the streets, the government lost nerve and the volte-face was announced on 24 March, 2005. Information Minister Sheikh Rashid said the decision to revive the religion column was made else, *“Qadianis and other apostates would be able to pose as Muslims and perform pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia”*.⁵

Targeting Pakistani Women

The freedom available to women in Pakistan has steadily shrunk over time, including the period of Musharraf’s rule. His attitudes on rape victims have outraged many women. On Musharraf’s orders, a gang-rape victim from Meerwalla village, Mukhtaran Mai, was disallowed from proceeding overseas lest she bring a bad name to Pakistan. Another rape victim, a woman doctor who described her assailant as an army officer, received harsh treatment from Musharraf who, in an interview to the Washington Post, dismissed her case by remarking: “A lot of people say if you want

⁴ General Pervez Musharraf, press conference, 16 May 2000, Islamabad.

⁵Jang, Islamabad-Lahore-Karachi, 25 March 2005. Also <http://www.thepersecution.org/nr/2005/march.html>

to go abroad and get a visa for Canada or citizenship and be a millionaire, get yourself raped.⁶”

Such attitudes towards women are typical of soldiers in a macho culture. It took a long struggle by the feminist movements across the world to counter them, and success has only been partial. But the Islamist agenda is different: it seeks total separation of the sexes, and to diminish the space for women in public life. This central goal is being efficiently and successfully pursued.

The consequences are sometimes catastrophic. For example, on April 9, 2006, 21 women and 8 children were crushed to death, and scores injured, in a stampede inside a three-storey madrassa in Karachi where a large number of women had gathered for a weekly congregation. Male rescuers, who arrived in ambulances, were prevented from moving injured women to hospitals.

One cannot dismiss this as just one incident. Soon after the October 2005 earthquake, as I walked through the destroyed city of Balakot, a student of the Frontier Medical College described to me how he and his male colleagues were stopped by religious elders from digging out injured girl students from under the rubble of their school building. The action of these elders was similar to that of Saudi Arabia's ubiquitous religious “*mutaween*” police who, in March 2002, had stopped schoolgirls from leaving a blazing building because they were not properly covered up. In rare criticism, Saudi newspapers had blamed the *mutaween* for letting 15 girls burn to death.

Female nurses looking after male patients at hospitals in NWFP may soon be banned. Pakistani health minister, Mohammad Nasir Khan, has assured the upper house of parliament that the government could consider the request sympathetically. This move arose from a motion moved by female parliamentary members of the MMA, the Islamist party that commands majorities in the provincial assemblies of the Frontier and Baluchistan provinces and offered crucial support for Musharraf staying on as president. Women's bodies are of particular concern to these holy men: “*We think that men could derive sexual pleasure from women's bodies while conducting ECG or ultrasound,*”⁷ proclaimed Maulana Gul Naseeb Khan, provincial secretary of the MMA. In his opinion women would be able to lure men under the pretext of these medical procedures. Therefore, he said, “*to save the supreme values of Islam and the message of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), the MMA has decided to impose the ban.*”⁸

A once-vibrant Pakistani culture is turning dull and drab. The drive to segregate is now also being found among educated women. Vigorous proselytizers bringing this message, such as Mrs. Farhat Hashmi, have been catapulted to heights of fame and fortune. As the country trades its South Asian identity for an Arab one, the Saudi *abaya*, a drab cloak almost unknown and unheard of in Pakistan until a few years ago, is now ubiquitous. Billboards with women's faces have disappeared from cities of the NWFP because the MMA deems the exhibition of unveiled women as un-Islamic.

⁶ BBC News, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4251536.stm

⁷ MMA bans ultrasound, ECG scanning of women by male technicians, Sept 21, 2003, [The Friday Times, Lahore](#), Mohammad Shehzad.

⁸ *ibid*

Leaders Pandering To Extremism

Hoping that it will add to their respectability and popularity, Pakistani political leaders other than General Musharraf, also with secular credentials, have jumped on the religion bandwagon. Shaukat Aziz, a former Citibanker and now prime minister of Pakistan, has made calls for nation-wide prayers for rain in years of drought. This effort to improve his Islamic standing became less laughable when, at an education conference in Islamabad, he proposed that religious education must start as soon as children enter school⁹. Aziz countered a suggestion by the moderate Islamic scholar, Javed Ghamdi, that only school children in their fifth year and above should be given formal Islamic education. Otherwise, said Ghamdi, they would stand in danger of becoming rigid and doctrinaire. The government's new education policy now requires Islamic studies to begin in the third year of school, a year earlier than in the previous policy.

Other ministers are no less determined to show their Islamic zeal. The federal minister for religious affairs, Ijaz ul Haq (Zia-ul-Haq's son), speaking at the launch of a book authored by a leading Islamic extremist leader on "*Christian Terrorism and The Muslim World*," argued that anyone who did not believe in jihad was neither a Muslim nor a Pakistani. He then declared that given the situation facing Muslims today, he was prepared to be a suicide bomber.

The clearest political expression of the shift towards a more violent and intolerant Islam is the rise of the MMA as a national force which on key issues both supports and is supported by General Musharraf's government. A measure of its power, and the threat it poses to society and the state, is the Pakistani Taliban movement that it has helped create, especially in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. Their success draws in large measure on the lessons they learned when working hand in the hand with the Pakistan army to create and sustain the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Talibanization Of Tribal Areas

Unable to combat the toxic mix of religion with tribalism, the Pakistani government has lost whatever administrative authority it once had. Under US pressure, the army had been mounting military offensives against Al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters who fled Afghanistan. Its assaults have taken a heavy civilian toll and local resistance has grown in many areas, particularly in North Waziristan.

A bit of history: In 2002, presumably on Washington's instructions, the Pakistan Army established military bases in South Waziristan. This had become a refuge for Taliban and Al Qaeda fleeing Afghanistan. Combat soon followed, with the army making extensive use of artillery and US-supplied Cobra gunships. By 2005 heavy fighting had spread to North Waziristan. Even though soldiers rarely ventured out from guard posts and heavy fortifications, the Army was taking losses whose extent has never been revealed. The senior army leadership, safely removed from combat areas, officially ascribed the resistance to "a few hundred foreign militants and terrorists". But morale continued to sink, with junior army men wondering why they

⁹ The Daily Times editorial, Saturday, June 03, 2006.
http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2006%5C06%5C03%5Cstory_3-6-2006_pg3_1

were being asked to attack their ideological comrades – the Taliban. Reportedly, local clerics refused to conduct funeral prayers for soldiers killed in action.

The half-hearted war, fought at the behest of a foreign power, failed. It led to the signing of a “peace treaty” on 1 September, 2006 in the town of Miramshah – which is now firmly in the grip of the Pakistani Taliban. Army officers, and the militants they had fought for 4 years, hugged each other while heavily armed, bearded, Taliban stood guard. Although the military governor of the province, Lt.Gen. Ali Mohammad Aurakzai, praised the peace agreement as “unprecedented in tribal history”, in fact it has a precedent in the 2004 Shakai agreement in South Waziristan, which had made the militants immensely stronger. The Miramshah treaty was blessed – and reportedly engineered – by Maulana Fazlur Rehman who (quite falsely) claims to be the father of the Taliban.

The Miramshah treaty met all demands made by the militants: the release of all jailed militants; dismantling of army checkpoints; return of seized weapons and vehicles; the right of the Taliban to display weapons (except heavy ones); and residence rights for fellow fighters from other Islamic countries. As for “foreign militants” – who Musharraf had blamed exclusively for the resistance, the militants were nonchalant: we will let you know if we find any! The financial compensation demanded by the Taliban for loss of property and life has not been revealed, but some officials have remarked that it is “astronomical”. In turn they promised to cease their attacks on civil and military installations, and give the army a safe passage out.

Washington and London cautiously welcomed Musharraf’s “peace treaty”, an indication of how well he had refined his persuasive powers for the West. It was also an admission of how matters had slipped out of control.

As Musharraf has now been forced to admit, the fact is that the local Taliban, as well as Al-Qaida, are popular and the army is not. In the tribal areas, the local Taliban now run a parallel administration that dispenses primitive justice according to tribal and Islamic principles. A widely available Taliban-made video that I saw showed the bodies of common criminals and bandits dangling from electricity poles in the town of Miramshah while thousands of appreciative spectators look on. A Pathan barber, who migrated to Islamabad from Wana, a regional capital, told me that many others like him are making their way to the big cities or abandoning their traditional occupation. Traditional musicians have also abandoned their professions.

The Pakistani Taliban (like their brothers in Afghanistan) view education as insidious. Pakistani newspapers frequently carry news of schools in the tribal regions being attacked destroyed by the Taliban. But rarely are these incidents followed by angry editorials or letters-to-the editor. Implicit sympathy for the Taliban remains strong among urban middle-class Pakistanis because they are perceived as standing up to the Americans, while the government has caved in.

Some argue that the army had no choice but to surrender in Waziristan. After all, on the other side of the Pak-Afghan border even the combined might of Nato and US forces have proved insufficient against the resurgent Taliban. So how could the Pakistani army ever win? But this hides the fact that the army’s high command demonstrated appallingly bad judgment and strategy by venturing into terrain where

guerrilla warfare is extremely effective. It was far better not to have engaged in combat, than to fight and lose. One feels that an intelligent use of force combined with traditional tribal diplomacy would not have led to such a humiliating capitulation.

Evidences Of The Overall Islamic Shift

Survey statistics make the Islamist shift underway in Pakistan yet more evident and quantitative. According to the Pew Global Survey (2006), the percentage of Pakistanis who expressed confidence in Osama bin Laden as a world leader grew from 45% in 2003 to 51% in 2005. This 6 point increase must be compared against responses to an identical questionnaire in Morocco, Turkey, and Lebanon, where bin Laden's popularity has sharply dropped by as much as 20 points¹⁰.

Support for the Sharia is also rising. A survey by the World Public Opinion.Org (April 24, 2007) found that 54% of Pakistanis wanted strict application of Sharia while 25% wanted it in some more dilute form. Totaling 79%, this was the largest percentage in the four countries surveyed (Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan, Indonesia)¹¹.

It is worth asking what has changed Pakistan so and what makes it so different from other Muslim countries? What has set one section of its people upon the other, created notions of morality centred on separating the sexes, and sapped the country's vitality? Some well meaning Pakistanis – particularly those in the diaspora – think that it is best to avoid such difficult questions. In seeking to “repackage Pakistan” for the media and change negative perceptions of Pakistan in the West, they hesitate to call for a change in the structure of the state and its outlook.

But at the heart of Pakistan's problems lies a truth – one etched in stone – that when a state proclaims a religious identity and mission, it is bound to privilege those who organize religious life and interpret religious text. Since there are many models and interpretations within every religion, there is bound to be conflict between religious forces over whose model shall prevail. There is also the larger confrontation between religious principles and practices and what we now consider to be ‘modern’ ideas of society, which have emerged over the past several hundred years. This truth, for all its simplicity, escaped the attention of several generations of soldiers, politicians, and citizens of Pakistan.

It is true that there has been some learning – Musharraf's call for “enlightened moderation” is a tacit (and welcome) admission that a theocratic Pakistan cannot work. But his call conflicts with his other, more important, responsibility as chief of the Pakistan Army which had consciously nurtured radicalism in previous decades.

The relationship between the army and religious radicals is today no longer as simple as in the 1980's. To maintain a positive image in the West, the Pakistani establishment must continue to decry Islamic radicalism, and display elements of liberalism that are deeply disliked by the orthodox. But hard actions will be taken

¹⁰ Pew Global Attitudes Project Islamic Extremism: Common Concern for Muslim and Western Publics. <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=248>

¹¹ World Public Opinion.Org , “Muslims Believe US Seeks to Undermine Islam”, <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafricara/346.php?nid=&id=&pnt=346>

only if the Islamists threaten the army's corporate and political interests, or if senior army commanders are targeted for assassination. The Islamists for their part hope for, and seek to incite, action by zealous officers to bring back the glory days of the military-mullah alliance led by General Zia ul Haq.

Musharraf and his corps commanders well know that they cannot afford to sleep too well. It is in the lower ranks that the Islamists are busily establishing bases. A mass of junior officers and low-ranking soldiers – whose world view is similar to that of the Taliban in most respects – feels resentful of being used as cannon fodder for fighting America's "war on terror". It is they who die, not their senior officers. So far, army discipline has successfully squelched dissent and forced it underground. But this sleeping giant can – if and when it wakes up – tear asunder the Pakistan Army, and shake the Pakistani state from its very foundations.

Is Radical Islam Inevitable?

With the large and growing popular sentiment against Musharraf and his army, one cannot rule out the possibility that in the years ahead nuclear armed Pakistan may fall under a neo-Taliban style Salafi-Wahabi-Deobandi leadership allied with conservative senior military leaders. If it does, then Pakistan could become the world's most dangerous state. But, although possible, it is certainly not inevitable – countervailing forces work against this nightmare scenario.

First, the Pakistani Establishment does not want extreme Islam – at least not yet. This oligarchy, which runs Pakistan by tacit consent, draws its membership from the military, the powerful feudal and landed class, and sections of the civil elite. It is a beneficiary of the status quo and presently has no desire to change it. Even if religion is a potent way of controlling the masses, the de-facto rulers who constitute the Establishment realize that too much of it can end up cramping their own personal liberties. Moreover, being linked to foreign aid and a globalizing world, they would suffer penalties imposed by the West if Pakistan were to Talibanize. Most, if not all, have their children studying in the West or international business interests.

Within the Establishment, the Pakistan Army has gained the most – and would like to see that it stays this way. As an institution it has acquired enormous corporate interests that sprawl across real estate, manufacturing, and service sectors. It also receives large amounts of military aid, all of which would be threatened if it comes into direct conflict with the US. In the 1960s and 1980s, and again since 9/11, the army discovered its high rental value when serving the US. Although the long-term costs to the society and state have been terrible, the Army has steadily increased its power and assets.

A second impediment to radical Islam is that religious leaders are not very successful at getting votes or getting a high national stature. This makes Pakistan very different from Iran. Historically, Pakistan's religious-political parties have fared poorly in electoral politics because of the many sectarian divides, narrow agendas that are irrelevant to the larger concerns of the country, poor organizational infrastructure (Jamaat-e-Islami excluded), and the lack of a well-educated and charismatic leadership. The success enjoyed by the MMA in NWFP and Baluchistan owed largely to the special situation created by the invasion of Afghanistan, and then Iraq, as well

as the support received from the military establishment. While they use the Islamic idiom, Pakistan's urban middle class is fairly sophisticated and resents radical Islamism. Traditionally, the Pathan mullah has had low social status and been the target of ridicule. Therefore, at a national level, the mainstream political parties are likely to have a clear lead over any religious-political party or even a coalition of such parties.

Thirdly, access to national and global television brings a level of sophistication in the popular culture. Images of the outside world, and open discussions on issues of contemporary importance, have created a public space that offers alternatives to the extreme radicalization offered by the mullahs. Of course, television cuts both ways because its power is also appreciated and used by radicals. On balance, however, the forces of globalization and open global communication do bring modern ideas and attitudes into society.

To conclude: it is an open question as to exactly how much further Pakistan will move towards religious radicalism in the years to come. There are many imponderables that will determine the pace: the expected moderation in US foreign policy after George W. Bush in regard to the Muslim world; the direction taken by the war in Afghanistan as well as Iraq; the outcome of current negotiations with India over Kashmir; whether the Baluchistan conflict is allowed to simmer as presently or brought to some resolution; and the future state of the economy and social services. It is a rather safe prediction, however, that the end of 2007 will see a continuation of the civil-military alliance that has dominated Pakistani politics for decades, and that the interests of this alliance will determine how far it can go towards meeting the radical threat. It is also virtually certain that the social forces set into motion over the years through the education system will make most of Pakistani society – barring pockets of liberalism in the upper crust of society – more conservative and orthodox relative to the previous generation.