

The pleasure of meeting Justin Podur was mine. I had often read him on ZNET. His reporting of my talk in Toronto is accurate, except for one minor point – I had said that the Taliban are products of the Jamiat-Ulema-Islam madrassas, not those of the Jamaat-i-Islami.

Now for more substantive issues where Justin feels there is a disagreement or there may actually be one:

1. When I displayed those pages out of children's primers showing the dreadful hate materials that young children in Pakistan are taught, the intent was certainly not to suggest such education as the sole reason behind the great gains Taliban-like thinking has made. However, I would consider this kind of education as an important enabling factor.

2. I agree with Justin that actions by the US against Pakistani sovereignty and the occupation of Afghanistan are important elements helping Taliban popularity. One could add other elements – the widespread feeling that the US is engaged in a war against Islam, Palestine-Israel, support of every Pakistani military dictator by the US establishment, etc. This too is incomplete because one must include a long list of failures of Pakistani state and society, successive military takeovers and, more generally, a sense of shame at the deep internal failures of Muslim societies over centuries. All combustible stuff. Mix it together and you get today's explosions. No one ingredient is enough.

2. Justin does not like my support for the idea that village councils (jirgas) be encouraged to form armed resistance to the Taliban who, as everyone knows, now control the bulk of the NWFP and are poised to take over other villages and towns. Okay, so let's look at the possibilities. First, one could accept a Taliban victory and all it means, stop fighting, and negotiate. This is what the religious right-wing in Pakistan wants to do, together with political parties like PML(N). This amounts to de-facto acceptance of a horrifically brutal Taliban state. Second, have a combination of Pakistan and US forces fight the Taliban using airpower and artillery. Third, enable tribal people who now hate the Taliban for their fanatical excesses, to fight for their survival under the leadership of their traditional leaders (maliks).

I can't think of a fourth option. Of course, there's the mantra of development and poverty reduction but that's impossible while the bullets are flying.

The third option strikes me as being the least worse. Of course it carries the very real danger of armed groups being promoted (once again) by the Pakistani establishment, a favourite past-practice of the ISI

for creating assorted jihadist groups for liberating Kashmir and conquering Afghanistan. It is also not an easy option. Suicide bombers have targeted peace jirgas and slit the throats of maliks.

3. Of course I respect Justin's plea for displacing Pakistan from the orbit of US imperialism. The question is how. Like many other left-wingers, I am torn between my inherent dislike of all that the US has done to the rest of the world, including its role in creating the jihadist monster back in the 80's, and the awful realities one would have to face if US/NATO were to suddenly pack their bags and exit Afghanistan tomorrow at 9:00am. Unable to advocate the slaughter of those who cannot live the Taliban way, I know that a better way has to be found.

In solidarity, yours,

Pervez Hoodbhoy, Islamabad.