

A leading Pakistani intellectual describes the Taliban as "barbaric" because they are against elementary forms of civilization and argues that negotiations are not possible with their leadership. Pervez Hoodbhoy, Professor of Nuclear Physics, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad, also says in an exclusive interview that the constitution of Pakistan needs to be altered to give equal rights to all citizens.

AA: Bearing in mind what happened at the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad, could you tell us how deep rooted are the Taliban in Pakistan ?

PH: "It was three or four years ago when we first heard of the Tehrik-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan. That translates into the Pakistan-Taliban movement. Prior to that we had thought the Taliban existed only in Afghanistan. Yes, we knew they were Pakistani creations, and in 1995 the ISI had formed and promoted them. That's how they won their great battle in Jalalabad, that's how they took over Kandahar and that's how they ultimately took over Kabul. They were Pakistan's favoured allies, Pakistan was the first to recognise the Taliban government. But after September 11, 2001 Pakistan made its famous U turn. I think they did right by doing so, but that was also the time that the establishment betrayed its allies. Nonetheless, even after 2001, for years after that, Pakistanis assumed it was just a problem for Afghanistan.

AA: But when does the link start with Pakistan ?

PH: " In 2004 we hear that they have an existence in Pakistan and are so powerful that the Pakistan army is making compromises. So you have the famous treaty of Shakai in 2004 in which it was agreed that the Taliban would not be attacked, that they would be compensated for their losses, that they in turn would not attack Pakistani troops. So one starts wondering at that time what the heck is going on ? How is it that the Pakistan army, which is reputed to have such good fighting skills, is making compromises over there and then suddenly once after that, we start hearing that the Taliban have spread into Swat, that mullahs are broadcasting fiery messages on their private FM stations, that they have indoctrinated a fair percentage of the population of Swat. Then comes the January of 2007 when the Taliban took over the Lal Masjid in Islamabad. The way it started was that the Capital Development Authority (CDA) announced it was going to demolish eight illegally constructed mosques in Islamabad. When they began doing this, I remember being astonished but pleased that they were finally taking notice of these illegal constructions. These had been intruding upon playgrounds, public parks, green areas and so forth.

"Immediately, there was a reaction. The Red Mosque authorities started organising people..they launched a campaign to stopped the illegal structures from being pulled down.

"Lal Masjid was associated with Jamia Hafsa which was a madrassa for girls. It was originally sanctioned as a simple madrassa, which means one storey. It ended up as four storeys and accommodating between three and four thousand students, whereas it should have been for about 300 students. It was part of the Lal Masjid complex, or rather it became that, and at the end of January the students under the instruction of Lal Masjid mullahs took over the neighbouring childrens library, a government building. The government watches, there was no action. After that it was all the way down the steep slippery slope until the 4th of July 2007. In the intervening six months there is much that the government could have done to have stopped it. For one thing it was obviously illegal for girls of Jamia Hassa to go out on to the streets, to kidnap women alleged to be prostitutes. It was obviously illegal and wrong for them to break into shops accompanied by male madrassa students armed with Kalashnikovs, destroying CDs, DVDs and videos. They set up their own parallel justice system and there was apparently no check to their activities.

Three months into the Red Mosque issue, I was introduced to Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain. He is a former Prime Minister and was Musharraf's emissary to the Red Mosque and he was very much in the news at that time. He also made statements, published in the newspapers, that he had agreed to all the demands of the girls. These were fanatical women with bamboo sticks accompanied by Kalashnikov-toting males.

He said to them, "Aap to hamari baitiyon ki tarah hain, aapkey khilaf hum koi operation nahin karengey" (You are like our daughters and we will not launch any operation against you) and he said that we agree to your demands for having sharia in Islamabad.

"So when I was introduced to Chaudhry Shujaat Hussein in Islamabad, I asked him, "Chaudhry sahib, is that what you said. ?" He replied, "Yes, it is." I asked him, "Who gave you the authority to do that ?". He pointed to a portrait of General Musharraf and said, "He gave me the authority." "Well", I said, "you are a disgrace to Pakistan and its people".

AA: Who signed the treaty of Shakai that you referred to earlier ?

PH: "That was General Aurakzai. He was a corps commander who later became governor of the Frontier province."

AA: Could you elaborate on the role of women in the Tehrik-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan and are there women suicide bombers as well ?

PH: "There are now suicide bombers to the extent of maybe 10 per cent and they are particularly effective because they can get through without being checked. This is a tactic that has been learned straight from Iraq. The women in Jamia Hafsa – the madrassa next to the Red Mosque – were under Ummeh Hassaan, the wife of Maulana Abdul Aziz. He was one of the two brothers – the other one was Abdul Rashid Ghazi who was killed - and he is currently in custody. He tried to flee from the siege by hiding under a burka. He was apprehended and exposed on television, leading to a temporary loss of status. Now his release has become a cause celebre.

"Now astonishingly enough the Zardari government has decided to restore Jamia Hafsa. After the military action Jamia Hasa was razed to the ground. Under pressure from the right wing they are now restoring that women's madrassa. They have already released Ummeh Hassaan and the pressure is now on to release her husband."

AA: But what about the role of women in this militancy. Do they take their cue from the Iraqis ?

PH: "They are girls who have been brought mostly from the FATA and the tribal areas. They came under desperate circumstances, sent by their fathers. They spent their formative years in the madrassa and they were brought up in a particular mind set. So when this whole thing happened (the siege of the Red Mosque), the girls were given the choice of leaving the madrassa. They chose to stay there and many were killed."

AA: You mentioned more than 60 suicide attacks in 2007. Was that one a week ?

PH: "It was mostly between July and December. And Islamabad has seen its 10th suicide attack. One of those, which left me quaking was because of my daughters could have been in the path. They were scheduled to accompany the Chief Justice at a rally in August. They were heading to towards the courts and it was then that the suicide bomber blew himself up and 32 people died."

AA: What are the favoured targets of the suicide bombers ? Is it buses, public buildings ?

PH: "The favoured targets of the suicide bombers are first of all the military and ISI. The military has been devastated by the suicide bombers who have obviously acted upon inside knowledge. They have been able to get past security barriers, they have managed to kill special forces commandos. One of the suicide bombers breaks into their mess and manages to kill 16 of them. There have been attacks on the general headquarters, there have been successful attacks on the ISI headquarters in Rawalpindi. I remember that day so well because my students were late. I asked them what happened and they said Murree Road was closed and again it was a suicide bomber who got through. He apparently knew the security codes. I had a student who joined the ISI and then dropped out because he did not know who was on which side."

AA: Would you comment on our perception from the outside that the ISI is actually very heavily involved with the Taliban ?

PH: "The ISI is bitterly divided within itself, as is the army. These are organisations that were brought up on the premise that defending Islam was just as important as defending Pakistan's national borders. After 2001 they find themselves in a quandary. Who must they obey? What they have been brought to believe, or those people who are in charge of the state now and don't have the same convictions? So that has been extremely divisive, which is precisely why one cannot say that the Pakistani state speaks with one voice. This is a fact with which the leadership of Pakistan is confronted. It may not be the fault of the present leadership. This is a legacy they have inherited from Zia-ul-Haq."

AA: Didn't Quaid-i-Azam Mohammed Ali Jinnah make a distinction between mosque and state ?

PH: "Mohammed Ali Jinnah did not leave any clear blueprint for the state of Pakistan. Had he lived longer he might have had a greater say in how the state was to be structured. But that's a hypothesis. He was primarily concerned with bringing Pakistan into existence. What he had in mind is unclear because he did not write any books, he did not author any academic titles wherein he expounded on his vision of Pakistan. He gave a number of speeches at different points and at different places. But some of those were based on expediency, others reflected his true thinking. But which reflected his expediency and which reflected his thinking is unclear. So for example he never used the word secularism. When he was asked, 'Will Pakistan be a secular state?', he replied, 'I don't know what a secular state is.'

Thereafter he had an interesting exchange with journalists from Australia where he essentially dodged the question. But precisely because he dodged the question, it has remained a question."

AA: Why do some people in Pakistan refer to the Taliban as barbaric ?

PH: "I would like many more people use the adjective 'barbaric'. The reason is obvious. These are people who do not want girls to be educated. In fact they blow up girls schools roughly at the average of two per week. They are opposed to music, they have declared that every form of music, whether classical or folk, is 'haram'. They do not allow even simple pleasures like kite flying or traditional pleasures like bear fighting. They sent in a suicide bomber in Kandahar who blew up a crowd of 1,000 who were spectators, killing a hundred and wounding who knows how many. They say no man who doesn't have a beard will be allowed to walk the streets and whip those without beards. They have issued threats against barbers and tailors because they say even tailoring clothes for women is inherently against islam. They are against those elementary forms of civilization and they are indeed barbarians. I feel their leadership cannot be negotiated with. It must be destroyed because people who follow this level of primitivism cannot be persuaded out of it. On the other hand I think the rank and file of the Taliban is made up of simple folk. They are those who have been used to simple ways of living, they are in desperate circumstances, they are also subjected to culture shock because when they look at life in the cities finding it totally out of consonance with the life that they have been leading. And, of course, there are plenty of criminals as well."

AA: Where do they draw their inspiration from ? Is it 18th century Wahabis from Saudi Arabia, or the Deobandi school ?

PH: "Before 1979 the Frontier region was populated by heavily armed tribals. The Soviet invasion led to the organisation of the great global jihad under the leadership of the US, joined in by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. But the logistics were primarily placed in Pakistan. The aim was to defeat the Soviet Union. To enthusethe mujahideen, the US projected this as a religious war and said islam was under threat. So it was not a question of one country invading another, the Reagan administration thought that the most efficacious way of doing this was to declare this as jihad. Soon the CIA, working under the Reagan administration, brought in the most hardened warriors from across the globe. The religious sanction came from Saudi Arabia, the logistics from Pakistan, the money and the weapons from the US."

AA: Islam would justify this level of violence ?

PH: "The history of islam has not been peaceful. Personally, I think no religion is peaceful. It can be used when necessary and parts of its history can be used to justify virtually anything."

AA: So the Americans in Afghanistan and their allies created a kind of 'goonda' cult and took out whatever suited them from the religion, handed it to them and said now go ahead and do whats necessary ?

PH: "It wasn't the goondas, it was ideologically charged Islamic fighters that they brought in. remember that at that point in history – the time of the Cold War – it was communism versus islam. They brought the fatwas from all the maulvis and mullahs from across the world and they projected it as a religious war."

AA: Is there any thing in the speeches of the Prophet and in the hadiths that proscribes music, or that you should not educate girls ?

PH: " There are arguments you can make both ways and people cherry pick. I cannot say that islam liberates or oppresses women, it depends on how you read it. To my mind saying that islam is a religion of peace is just as wrong as saying that it's a religion of war. You just pick out the pieces you like."

AA: The Taliban have created problems for and in Pakistan, yet many Pakistanis remain ambivalent about them. Why ?

PH: "Lets try and understand what the Taliban demand. Their demands to the government of Pakistan are three in number. First that they should be allowed to fight the Americans in Afghanistan for as long as the Americans occupy Afghanistan. The second demand is that the Sharia should be ordered as the law of the land in Pakistan, starting with the Frontier province and then extending to all of the country. Sharia is the system of law set down in the hadiths. What it means depends on what school of thought you belong to and there are four major schools. The third one is that whatever harm has been done to them by the Pakistani state should be compensated, prisoners released and so forth. But basically its just these three demands. The problem is with all of these. First that if Pakistan gives them sanction to attack the infidels in Afghanistan, where does that leave Pakistan ? Is it ready to fight the US as a declared hostile state? On the second demand, if the Sharia is to be imposed then that's the end of civil law in Pakistan. It will also lead to infinite divisiveness. Pakistan may be muslim, but its infinitely sectarian. Even more it has a 20 to 30 per cent Shia minority. Forget about the one to two per

cent hindu, sikh and Christian minorities. So what happens to all except the majority Deobandis and Baralvis ? The third demand means you allow the Taliban to carry weapons, to give back all those that have been taken back from them. All three are extreme demands, but nevertheless the rejection of the Taliban by the Pakistani people has not been unequivocal. Why ? Two reasons. One is that Pakistanis have been told from the very beginning that Pakistan was made from islam. If the Taliban say they are the true followers of islam, then even if some of their acts are extreme, they are still in the right direction. They are simply seen as being too enthusiastic about things, but they are seen as shaving it basically right. The second thing is that they are fighting the Americans and they are the only ones doing so today. This is more important than the first reason."

AA: You and others speak of the need for a new vision of Pakistan. Is the country in desperate straits ?

PH: " To my mind Pakistan has to stop pretending that it is a religious state. That it is defined by a religion. The fact is that there are many different faiths living within islam, as well as faiths living outside of islam. If all those who live within the geographic boundaries of Pakistan are to be considered as citizens, they are going to have to be given equal rights and be regarded equally. The constitution of Pakistan will have to be altered to express that fact. To have anything different means that those who do not belong to that one particular sect of islam are going to be discriminated against, to be excluded. And that is simply not possible for a modern state to have. If Pakistan is to have a future, it will have to have ethical and moral premises that are independent of the particular linguistic and religious backgrounds of its citizens."

AA: If Pakistan implodes, how will that affect India ?

PH: " India has a particular responsibility to see that Pakistan stays together, does not implode or explode, because in either situation the people of India would be in extreme danger. One always talks of Pakistan's nuclear weapons, but even if those nuclear weapons are somehow captured or neutralised, that too would not be sufficient. Here is a country of 170 million. If a tiny fraction is possessed of the idea that it must go out and change the world and use horrible methods, it would be an extreme danger for the world and in particular India and China. So as a citizen of Pakistan I have to fervently hope that Pakistan stays together. That's for our own people but also for the rest of the world. The fact is that geographical boundaries in this day and age do not constitute any insurmountable obstacle to terrorists. How difficult is it to cross two miles ? Well it is difficult to cross directly, but then you can go around the world pretty much get to where you want. India's well-being lies in Pakistan holding together."

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