

Whither Pakistan? A Five-Year Forecast

by
Pervez Hoodbhoy

First the bottom line: Pakistan will not break up, there will not be another military coup, the Taliban will not seize the presidency in Islamabad, Pakistan's nuclear weapons will not go astray, and the Islamic shari'a will not become the law of the land.

That was the good news. It conflicts with opinions in the mainstream US press, as well as with some in the Obama administration. For example, in March 2009, David Kilcullen, a top adviser to Gen. David H. Petraeus, declared that state collapse could occur within six months. This is highly improbable.

Now for the bad news: the clouds hanging over the future of Pakistan's state and society are getting darker. Collapse is not impending, but there is a slow-burning fuse. While time-scales cannot be mathematically forecast, the speed of societal decline has surprised many who have long warned that religious extremism is devouring Pakistan.

Here is how it all went down the hill:

The 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan devastated the Taliban. Many fighters were products of madrassas in Pakistan, and their trauma was partly shared by their erstwhile benefactors in the Pakistan military and intelligence. Recognizing that this force would remain important for maintaining Pakistani influence in Afghanistan – and keep the low-intensity war in Kashmir going – the army secretly welcomed them on Pakistani soil. Rebuilding and rearming was quick, especially as the US tripped up in Afghanistan after a successful initial victory. General Musharraf's strategy of running with the hares and hunting with hounds worked initially. But then American demands to dump the Taliban became more insistent, and the Taliban also grew angry at this double game. As the army's goals and tactics lost coherence, the Taliban advanced.

In 2007, the *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP, the movement of Pakistani Taliban) formally announced its existence. With a blitzkrieg of merciless beheadings of soldiers and suicide bombings, the TTP drove out the army from much of the Frontier province. It held about 10% of Pakistan's territory by early 2009.

Even then, few Pakistanis saw the Taliban as the enemy. Apologists for the Taliban abounded, particularly among opinion-forming local TV anchors that whitewashed their atrocities, and insisted that they should not be resisted by force. Others supported them as fighters against America's imperial might. The government's massive propaganda apparatus lay rusting. Beset by ideological confusion, it had no cogent response to the claim that Pakistan was made for Islam and the Taliban were Islamic fighters.

The price paid for the government's prevarication was immense. A weak-kneed state allowed fanatics to devastate hitherto peaceful Swat, once an idyllic tourist-friendly valley. Citizens were deprived of their fundamental rights. Women were lashed in public,

hundreds of girl's schools were blown up, non-Muslims had to pay a special tax (*jizya*), and every form of art and music was forbidden. Policemen deserted en masse, and institutions of the state crumbled. Thrilled by their success, the Taliban violated the *Nizam-e-Adl* Swat deal just days after it was negotiated in April, 2009. They quickly moved to capture more territory in the adjacent area of Buner. Then barely 80 miles from Islamabad (as the crow flies), their spokesman, Muslim Khan, boasted the capital would be captured soon. The army and government still dithered, and the public remained largely opposed to the use of military force.

And then a miracle of sorts happened. Sufi Mohammed, the illiterate, ageing leader of the Swat *sharia* movement, while addressing a huge victory rally in early May, lost his good sense to excessive exuberance. He declared that democracy and Islam were incompatible, rejected Pakistan's Islamic constitution and courts, and even accused Pakistan's fanatically right-wing Islamic parties of mild heresy. Even for a Pakistani public enamored by the call to *sharia*, that was just a bit too much. The army, now with public support for the first time since the birth of the insurgency, finally mustered the will to fight.

That fight is on. A major displacement of population, estimated at 3 million, is in process. This tragedy could have been avoided if the army had not nurtured extremists earlier. For the moment the Taliban are retreating. But it will be a long haul to eliminate them from the complex mountainous terrain of Swat and Malakand. Wrestling North and South Waziristan, hundreds of miles away, will be even more costly. Army actions in the tribal areas, and retaliatory suicide bombings by the Taliban in the cities, are likely to extend into the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, the cancerous offshoots of extremist ideology continue to spread. Another TTP has recently established itself – Tehrik-e-Taliban Punjab. One expects that major conflict will eventually shift from Pakistan's tribal peripheries to the heartland, southern Punjab. Indeed, the Punjabi Taliban are now busy ramping up its operations, with a successful suicide attack on the police and intelligence headquarters in Lahore in May.

What exactly do the Pakistani Taliban want? As with their Afghan counterparts, fighting America in Afghanistan is certainly one goal. But still more important is replacing secular and traditional law and customs in Pakistan's tribal areas with their version of the *shari'a*. This goal – which they share with religious political parties like the *Jamat-e-Islami* – is working for a total transformation of society. This calls for elimination of music, art, entertainment, and all manifestations of modernity and westernism. Side goals include destroying the Shias – who the Sunni Taliban regard as heretics – and chasing away the few surviving native Christians, Sikhs, and Hindus from the Frontier province. While extremist leaders like Baitullah and Fazlullah derive support from marginalized social groups, they do not demand employment, land reform, better health care, or more social services. This is not a liberation movement by a long shot, although some marginalized Pakistani leftists labor under this delusion.

The future: tribal insurgents cannot overrun Islamabad and Pakistan's main cities which are protected by thousands of heavily armed military and paramilitary troops. Rogue elements within the military and intelligence agencies have instigated or organized suicide attacks against their own colleagues. Now, dazed by the brutality of these attacks, the officer corps finally appears to be moving away from its earlier sympathy and support for extremism. This makes a seizure of the nuclear arsenal improbable. But Pakistan's "urban Taliban", rather than illiterate tribal fighters, pose a nuclear risk. There are indeed more than a few scientists and engineers in the nuclear establishment with extreme religious views.

While they aspire to state power, even without this the Taliban are achieving considerable success. Through terror tactics and suicide bombings they have made fear ubiquitous. Women are being forced into the *burqa*, while anxious private employers and government departments have advised their male employees in Peshawar and other cities to wear shalwar-kameez rather than trousers. Coeducational schools across Pakistan are increasingly fearful of attacks – some are converting to girls-only or boys-only schools. Video shops are going out of business, while native musicians and dancers have fled or changing their profession. A sterile Saudi-style Wahabism is beginning to impact upon Pakistan's once-vibrant culture and society.

It could be far worse. One could imagine that General Kayani is overthrown in a coup by radical Islamist officers who seize control over the nuclear weapons and make intervention by outside forces impossible. Jihad for liberating Kashmir is subsequently declared as Pakistan's highest priority and earlier policies for crossing the LOC are revived; Shia's are expelled into Iran and Hindus are forced over into India; ethnic and religious minorities in the Northern Areas flee Pashtun invaders; anti-Taliban forces such as the ethnic MQM and the Baluch nationalists are decisively crushed by Islamists; and shari'a is declared across the country. Fortunately, this seems improbable – as long as the army stays together.

What can the US, which is still the world's pre-eminent power, do to turn the situation around? The answer is: amazingly little.

In spite of being on the American dole, Pakistan is probably the most anti-American country in the world. It has a long litany of grievances. Some are pan-Islamic but others derive from its bitter experiences of being a US ally in the 1980's. Once at the cutting edge of the US organized jihad against the Soviets, it was dumped once the war was over and left to deal with numerous toxic consequences. Although much delayed, Hilary Clinton's recent acceptance of blame is welcome. But festering resentments produced a paranoid mind-set that blames the US for all of Pakistan's ills, old and new. A meeting of young people that I addressed in Islamabad recently had many who thought that the Taliban are US agents paid to create instability so that Pakistan's nukes could be seized by the US. Other such absurd conspiracy theories also enjoy huge currency.

Nevertheless, the US is not powerless. Chances of engaging with Pakistan positively have improved under the Obama administration. Real progress towards a Palestinian state, and dealing with Muslims globally, would have enormous resonance in Pakistan.

Although better financial monitoring is needed, Pakistan's support life-line must not be cut. Else economic collapse would follow in a matter of months, and then a certain Taliban victory. The government and army must be kept afloat until such time as Pakistan is fully ready to take on extremism by itself. The US should also initiate a conference that brings Iran, India, and China together. All countries must recognize that extremism represents a regional as well as global danger, and must formulate an action plan aimed at squeezing the extremists.

Pakistan's political leadership and army must squarely face the extremist threat, accept the US and India as partners rather than adversaries, enact major reforms in income and land distribution, revamp the education and legal systems, and address the real needs of citizens. Most importantly, Pakistan will have to clamp down on the fiery mullahs who spout hatred from mosques and stop suicide bomber production in madrassas. For better or for worse, it will be for Pakistanis alone to figure out how to handle this.

The author is chairman of the physics department at Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad