

# Pakistan: Talibanization

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A severed head is waved before a baying crowd. The camera zooms in to show a second bloodied corpse, the eyes gouged out and a wad of cash stuffed in the mouth, swinging from a pole. He is one of 29 “criminals, drug pushers, bootleggers and extortionists” executed for running “dens of iniquity,” says the voiceover on the videotape. The last reel shows a mess of bodies, some headless, being hauled in a pickup truck along a muddy street. Young men with shaggy black hair and guns slung over their shoulders are seen watching the lynchings. “The Taliban have done the job the ‘enlightened moderates’ refused to do. May God provide us with leaders like Mullah Omar,” concludes the narrator.

The film is not archival footage from 1996, the year the Taliban introduced themselves as rulers of Afghanistan by entering Kabul and stringing up the communist former president, Mohammed Najibullah. It was shot in December 2005 in Miramshah, a town in Pakistan’s North Waziristan tribal agency, 12 miles from the Afghan border.

Nor is the crowd made up of Afghans or mujahideen from the struggle against the Soviet occupation or the civil wars that came in its wake, at least not in the majority. The young men are Pakistani seminary and school students, mostly indigenous to Waziristan, as well as jobless Pashtun tribesmen. They are led by a new generation of militant clerics or mullahs. They call themselves the Pakistan Taliban because that is what they are, says Pakistani journalist Rahimullah Yusufzai. “They are Taliban in the sense that they share the same ideology as the Taliban in Afghanistan, and see them as their allies. If you ask them ‘Who is your leader?’ they will say the Afghan Taliban emir Mullah Mohammed Omar. They also fight alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan.”

Today the Pakistan Taliban is the “de facto political leadership” in North and South Waziristan, Yusufzai believes. The Waziristans are the most populous of seven tribal agencies that are home to three million mainly Pashtun tribesmen. The agencies share a ragged mountain border with the domain of fellow Pashtun tribes in Afghanistan. They are collectively known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas or FATA.

This 370 mile-long frontier — and the Talibanized rule emerging there — represents Pakistan’s gravest internal threat, says Gen. Pervez Musharraf, the army chief who led a coup against the country’s civilian government in 1998 and named himself president two years later. In the eyes of Afghanistan watchers like Ahmed Rashid and Barnett Rubin, the Pakistan Taliban, allied with al-Qaeda and Islamists from Central Asia and Chechnya, have carved out an indispensable sanctuary for insurgents fighting in Afghanistan. For Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte, FATA is the “secure hideout” from which al-Qaeda “radiates to its affiliates in the Middle East, North Africa and Europe.”

The Pakistan Taliban is a new movement, though its roots are old. These roots can be found in the isolation of the tribal areas, in the tribal code of pashtunwali that governs their residents and, fundamentally, in the rupture of tradition caused by the import of a new Islamist ideology in the 1980s. In the taxonomy of the late Pakistani analyst Eqbal Ahmad, the Pakistan Taliban are a “restorationist” movement. The religious vision of their leaders harkens back to an imagined, if debased, Islamic past. But the material aspiration of many of their followers is for a different, better future. They are united by war. The ties that bind leaders and led together can only be loosened by changing the conditions of the present in which they live.

## FATA

For the first 50 years of Pakistan’s existence, the government’s policy toward the FATA was the same as that of the British Raj. Tribal leaders, or maliks, were granted semi-autonomous powers in exchange for fealty to the crown or, post-independence, the regime. In return for recognizing the British-drawn Durand Line as Pakistan’s border with Afghanistan, the maliks were granted access to their tribal lands, heritage and kin across the line. In accepting the border, the maliks ensured that the tribal areas would remain a buffer zone, and a part of Pakistan only in the sense that the zone was not part of Afghanistan. The maliks’ respect for the boundary remains a vital concession for Islamabad. No Afghan leadership, not the Taliban and not the US-backed government of President Hamid Karzai, has ever recognized the Durand Line as a legitimate border.

The result is a region that is contested in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, but is of neither. This separateness can be seen in the fierce independence of the Pashtun tribes; until recently, no foreign (meaning, non-Pashtun) troops were allowed in the tribal areas. It can also be felt in an irredentist longing for an independent Pashtun nation, or Pashtunistan, that would incorporate not just FATA and the Pashtun areas in Afghanistan but also Pakistan’s Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and parts of Baluchistan. Above all, the isolation is registered in these areas’ extreme poverty, scant social services, non-existent development projects, and very low health and literacy rates — the worst in Pakistan.

For the last 30 years, FATA’s isolation has served another purpose: The state has used the region as the launching pad for Pakistan-inspired insurgencies in Afghanistan, with the first coming after the communist coup in Kabul in 1978. Fueled by CIA and Saudi money, but engineered by Pakistan’s premier Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) directorate, the militias incubated in the tribal areas became national, regional and ultimately global Islamist movements, of which al-Qaeda is only the most notorious. Amidst penury grew a war economy driven by opium, guns and God, while jihad was first taught, then waged, by generations of young men, dislocated and orphaned in Afghan refugee camps, but schooled in madrassas allied to one or another of Pakistan’s Islamist parties or sponsored by states like Saudi Arabia.

According to the estimate of Pashtun nationalist politician Afrasiab Khattak, as many as 500,000 young men were thus socialized during the Afghan wars. Overwhelmingly Pashtun, they were bound by tribal codes of honor, loyalty and revenge. But, uprooted from their villages, they were also susceptible to new idioms of Islam, whether the Deobandi strain peddled by the Pakistani madrassas or the austere Wahhabism of the Saudi Arabians and other “Afghan Arabs” who had come to fight the Soviets. In many cases, faith became a demotic cocktail of the two.

Pakistan’s original motive for planting this “volcano on both sides of the border” was as simple as it was myopic, says Khattak. Regionally, the regime of Gen. Zia ul Haq viewed the tribal areas as Pakistan’s bridge to a client state in Afghanistan, supplying the “strategic depth” necessary for

resisting India, the “external” enemy to the east. Domestically, the socialization of so many in political Islam would produce an endless stream of foot soldiers for jihad. They, in turn, could be mobilized against the demand for Pashtunistan, the “internal” enemy.

What Zia did not foresee was the impact such tampering would have on the traditional power relations in Pashtun society, says analyst Shaukat Qadir. “The Pashtun tribal belt in Pakistan and Afghanistan is a relatively egalitarian society. But it has a hierarchy, a system of tribal ‘earls,’ who historically were the maliks. During the anti-Soviet jihad, the ‘earls’ delegated the responsibility for fighting to the younger generation,” Qadir explains. “When the Russians withdrew, some fighters handed back power. But others, like Mullah Omar, did not. They said, ‘We are the ones who defeated the Russians, not the earls.’ This is why many Pashtun elders deserted the Taliban when it came to power. In their eyes, Mullah Omar wasn’t blue-blooded enough. They supported the American invasion — it was seen as a restoration of the old tribal order. The same thing is happening now on the Pakistan side of the border. With the US invasion, many of the younger tribesmen wanted to join the Afghan Taliban and fight. The Pakistan army and their elders tell them they can’t. And the younger tribesmen are refusing. ‘Why was it jihad to resist the Russians, but now it is terrorism to resist the Americans?’ they ask. Such a question is a challenge to the very fabric of tribal society. It is not a progressive challenge. It is not demanding integration with Pakistan or development. It’s seeking war and an archaic system of government. But it is a challenge.”

The shift in power relations was consecrated by one of the few political reforms Pakistan introduced into FATA. In 1996, the franchise was widened to include the whole adult population rather than just the maliks. Since political parties were not allowed to stand in the tribal areas, it was the mullahs who picked up much of the new vote. The chief beneficiary was Pakistan’s largest Islamist movement, the Jamaat Ulama-e Islam, led by Maulana Fazl ul Rahman. The Jamaat Ulama-e Islam is a pro-Taliban party. It is also the dominant power in a coalition of Islamist parties (the Muttahida Majlis-e Amal) that has served as one of the pillars of Musharraf’s military regime, acquiescing in the general’s bid to extend his presidency for five years, sharing governance with his Muslim League party in Baluchistan province and ruling alone in the NWFP.

Many of the Pakistan Taliban’s current leaders were members of the Jamaat Ulama-e Islam. No longer. Following Musharraf’s ending of support for the Taliban in 2001, they shifted allegiance to Mullah Omar and provided sanctuary to his fighters. Today, they show no more deference to the tribal hierarchy than Mullah Omar does, and they scorn the military-Islamist alliance propped up by the Jamaat Ulama-e Islam. They want regime change. This, too, has shaken the established tribal order, says journalist Ismail Khan. “Historically, the clerics were way down the social ladder in tribal Pashtun society. Now it’s the mullahs who call the shots. They have moved from pulpit to power.”

## **TALIBANIZATION**

It was not the September 11, 2001 attacks themselves that set these dynamics in motion. In return for bases for US troops in Pakistan and other concessions, Washington tolerated the Afghan Taliban’s quiet recovery in the tribal areas. With all eyes on the hunt for Osama bin Laden, Pakistan’s view was “live and let live,” recalls one Western diplomat. “And we thought: ‘If the region isn’t on fire, there is no need to bring out the hoses.’” Pakistan hands-off policy was also driven by the view that US interest in Afghanistan might prove no more lasting after the fall of the Taliban than it had been following the Soviet withdrawal in 1988. According to military analyst Ayesha Siddiq, “The military’s thinking was that the Taliban had been an asset. So why destroy an asset, especially if the foreign powers withdraw and there is a power vacuum in Afghanistan?”

Pakistan did go after al-Qaeda, killing and capturing 700 suspects, including the alleged September 11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. Musharraf also acted to prevent the Afghan Taliban from gaining too strong a foothold in the tribal areas. The methods were again those of the Raj. He appealed to the maliks to surrender foreign fighters in their midst. If they complied, they were lavished with bribes. If they refused, their homes were destroyed. The policy of winning over tribesmen was “long, complicated and exhausting,” recalls Ismail Khan. But there were signs it was working. If not ousted, Taliban and foreign fighters were being kept at bay. There was not yet Talibanization.

But Washington’s hunger for victory grew sharper as 2002 wore on. A resurgent Taliban harried US soldiers in Afghanistan, and the non-capture of Osama bin Laden haunted the politicians back home. In 2003, US commanders told Musharraf they had proof “high-value” al-Qaeda fugitives were hiding out in South Waziristan. They warned that if his army refused to go after them, their army would do so. In March 2004 — for the first time in the history of the state — a reluctant Musharraf dispatched 80,000 Pakistani soldiers to the tribal areas. To the outraged maliks, who saw the invasion as a betrayal of their basic pact with Pakistan’s rulers, he promised “development.” To an unconvinced army, he vowed success. “We were told that the tribal campaign would be a cakewalk, that it would be over in weeks,” recalls the former Pakistani ambassador to Afghanistan, Tanvir Ahmad Khan.

The campaign was a disaster. Not only were 250 Pakistani soldiers killed in the fighting, but also the army had to sue for a ceasefire with local (in other words, Pakistani) Taliban commanders, who emerged as the true defenders of the tribes. The political impact was profound, says Ismail Khan. “It empowered the [Taliban] militants on the one hand and weakened the government on the other...to the extent that the militants began negotiating directly with the military, circumventing not only the political administration, but also the maliks. The power equation shifted from the political administration to the army and from the maliks to the tribal militants.”

Over the next two years, the army mounted eight more incursions, first in South Waziristan, then in North. With every raid the Taliban grew stronger. They killed nearly 200 pro-government maliks, attacked army convoys, established havens, banned music, burned down video stores and declared Islamic law to be the source of authority rather than tribal custom or state legislation. In March 2006, Taliban fighters tried to overrun Miramshah, commandeering the telephone exchange and blasting its main garrison. They were routed, but at a cost of 1,000 people dead and tens of thousands displaced. In the aftermath it was the Taliban — not the government — that provided compensation for the bereaved. “It’s chaos,” said one survivor. “The Taliban have left, yet everyone knows they are still there. The army is on the streets, but everyone knows it’s not in control.”

The army apparently came to the same realization. During the campaigns, 700 soldiers were killed and 1,500 wounded. Ominously in a military regime, six officers faced court-martial for refusing to serve in the tribal areas. There were reports of soldiers deserting and others turning a blind eye as the Taliban and others slipped into Afghanistan. The mood in the ranks was summed up by a young officer. “I am a soldier.... I must and will do my duty. But I didn’t join the army to kill my own people.”

Musharraf read the signs. In May 2006, he appointed tribesman and ex-corps commander Mohammed Jan Orakzai as governor of the NWFP and tribal areas. Orakzai’s task was to clinch a swift ceasefire with the Taliban and, in the long term, rebuild the tribal system destroyed by the military campaigns. The ISI quietly allowed free passage within the Waziristans to Afghan Taliban commanders Jalaluddin Haqqani and Mullah Dadallah. These leaders’ task was to marshal the different tribal Taliban chieftains into a movement coherent enough to abide by a truce. But the price for peace was Talibanization. It was pronounced in a communiqué issued by Haqqani in May 2006.

The message called on “all local and foreign fighters...not to fight against Pakistan, since this is in the interest of the US.” It also instructed the mujahideen to “collect revenues” from the people of Waziristan and appoint “emirs to perform duties with mutual consultation,” a code for establishing an Islamic system of rule. The communiqué was posted in the name of the “Islamic Emirate” and signed, among others, by “President” Mullah Omar. But its political weight was felt in the peace agreement signed in North Waziristan on September 5, 2006, ostensibly between Orakzai and 44 maliks, but actually between the army and seven local Taliban leaders nominated by Haqqani.

In return for verbal pledges by the Taliban to stop attacks on soldiers and pro-government tribesmen and end infiltration into Afghanistan, the army agreed to confine its forces to barracks, free Taliban prisoners, return confiscated weaponry and compensate victims of army raids. There was no compensation for victims of the Taliban. Six months on, the army has fulfilled every one of its pledges. The Taliban have observed theirs mostly in the breach. Six pro-government elders have been assassinated, and while cross-border incursions have declined, this is due to winter weather rather than the agreement. In November, NATO registered 200 cross-border “actions.”

The Pakistan Taliban seized on the cessation of hostilities in the Waziristans to put into effect the new order adumbrated in Haqqani’s communiqué. Across the two agencies, sharia courts, police forces, tax collectors and public offices were established, “a parallel administration with all the functions of the state,” says Ismail Khan. There was an increase in foreign fighters, say locals, including 1,000 Uzbeks, fleeing their country after government massacres in 2005. There were also a handful of Arabs, who had reportedly made the long trek from Iraq, via Iran. Some say these foreign fighters are the source of the rise in the use of improvised explosive devices and suicide bombs, not only in Afghanistan but also, increasingly, in Pakistan.

## PEACE

On October 30, 2006, three Hellfire missiles slammed into a madrassa in Bajaur tribal agency. Eighty-two young men were killed. Musharraf said they were Taliban militants “doing military training.” Given the scale of the carnage, few believed him in Pakistan and none at all in the tribal areas. Locals insisted the dead were students. They said that it was not Pakistani army helicopters that unloaded the missiles but a US Predator drone. They were also clear about the purpose: to thwart a North Waziristan-like peace agreement being signed that day between the army and pro-Taliban tribesmen in Bajaur.

Mass murder and cross-border incursions are the bluntest instruments the US have used to bring order to the tribal areas. But they are not the only ones. In the five months since the Waziristan deal, Pakistan has been buffeted by a veritable gale of criticism from Washington, ranging from editorials in the New York Times to testimony before a Senate Select Committee by John Negroponte. There is new US legislation threatening to predicate all military assistance to Pakistan on the president’s “determining and certifying” that Islamabad is taking “all actions” against the Taliban. Soft or hard, the message is the same: There should be less “appeasement” of the Taliban in the tribal areas and more “judicious use of force,” in the phrase of one Western diplomat.

But “every use of force is a gain for the Taliban,” says Yusufzai. The first consequence of the Bajaur attack for the Pakistan Taliban was a swell of new cadre. The second was revenge, with the murder in November of 42 army recruits by a Taliban suicide bomber on a parade ground in the NWFP — the worst attack on the Pakistan army outside of war. Bajaur also left Musharraf’s strategy of restoring the power of the maliks in shambles, says Tanvir Ahmed Khan. “Historically, agreements in the tribal areas were conditioned on the government not breaking its word. With Bajaur, the

government broke its word, and the sense of betrayal among the tribesmen is enormous. I doubt whether the old tribal structures can ever be reconstructed. The firebrands have taken over.”

There are probably only two ways to bring peace to the tribal areas. The first is recognition that the Pashtun are the majority population in Afghanistan and that the Taliban are an authentic voice among them. Very simply, there cannot be a political settlement in Afghanistan without the Taliban. Yet for this to be acceptable to the other Afghan parties, the Taliban must again become an Afghan movement, rather than a Pashtun movement with roots in Pakistan or an Islamist movement with ties to al-Qaeda. But in return for the Taliban divesting itself of this foreign support, there must be recognition of the Taliban’s fundamental condition for negotiations: the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Afghanistan, especially NATO.

The debate over whether there is a “moderate” Taliban is an old one. Tanvir Ahmad Khan believes such a creature exists. Yusufzai says the “moderates” have already defected and only the ideologues are left. But both men agree there is no bigger mistake than to equate the Taliban with al-Qaeda. The distinction was drawn most clearly by Mullah Omar himself in an interview with Pakistan’s Dawn newspaper on January 4. “They [al-Qaeda] have set jihad as their goal, while we have set the expulsion of American troops from Afghanistan as our target.” In other words, whatever the Islamist idiom or ideological ambition, the Taliban are a nationalist movement, like Hamas and Hizballah. Al-Qaeda is not.

The second way is to bring development to an area where three percent of women receive education and there is one doctor for every 8,000 people. “Does such a situation benefit the militants?” asks Muhammad Sharif, a medic from South Waziristan. “Of course it does.” But such development cannot be imposed from Islamabad by an army that has lost all credibility or through decadent tribal structures overtaken by new political forces. Coupled with development must be democracy, so that the people of the tribal areas can choose not only which political party best represents them, but also the final status of their society — whether it should remain as it is, be integrated into Pakistan or Afghanistan, or become part of a new Pashtun autonomous zone that straddles the border. “But only a civilian government can bring this reform,” says Ahmed Rashid. “How can you have free elections in FATA when there are no free elections in Pakistan?”

## WAR

Neither negotiations with the Taliban nor democracy in Pakistan are especially high on the US agenda. On January 16, a rocket attack killed eight people in a remote hamlet in South Waziristan. The Pakistani army took responsibility, saying the dead were foreign fighters and the site an al-Qaeda camp. Locals said the slain were woodcutters, and that their killer (as in Bajaur) was a US Predator drone. The Taliban commander in South Waziristan, Baitullah Mehsud, promised Pakistan “pain.” He did not evince any discomfort himself. Sitting on a hillside beside the ruined compounds, he radiated confidence.

“People have seen the injustices of the Americans. They have seen their sons being killed for US dollars. Were we to preach for 100 years, we could not secure the kind of support that is generated by such raids.”

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