

# **Letter from Pakistan: Days of Rage - Challenges for the nation's future**

Friday 20 July 2007, by [DALRYMPLE William](#) (Date first published: 16 July 2007).

In the white glare of a hot summer's noon, the broad avenues of Islamabad, Pakistan's modern capital, are usually empty. But on a sweltering day this May the streets were crowded with noisily chanting protesters, all of them demonstrating against the military government of President Pervez Musharraf. Three separate protests were under way. Each one represented a slightly different vision of the future that Pakistan might have if-as now seems more likely than ever-Musharraf's government were to fall.

The largest crowd by far was made up of lawyers in starched collars, white shirts, and black suits. They marched in orderly ranks, three abreast, like emperor penguins in a nature film. Some held up very British-looking umbrellas, on which markedly un-catchy slogans, such as "Long Live Lawyers Unity," had been carefully daubed in white paint. In earlier demonstrations, the lawyers had clashed with riot police, and the country's most senior barristers, silk ties flying, had responded with surprising vigor, hurling back tear-gas cannisters at staff-wielding policemen and jabbing at them with furled umbrellas.

The lawyers began demonstrating when, on March 9<sup>th</sup>, Iftikhar Chaudhry, Pakistan's Chief Justice, was suspended, reportedly because Musharraf had accused him of using his position for personal gain and for trying to get his son a top police job. The first demonstrations, which consisted of a few hundred lawyers protesting against Musharraf's attack on the independence of the judiciary, escalated into a full-scale campaign against military rule when, a week later, riot police attacked first the protesters and then the offices of an Islamabad news channel that had broadcast images of police beating up barristers. By May, the demonstrations had turned into a

countrywide protest movement calling for fair elections, a civilian government, and the return of real democracy.

On that particular May day, the overwhelming majority of the protesting barristers were men. Yet at the center of the group was a fragile-looking, diminutive woman in a crisp white shalwar kameez, a neat black jacket, and heavy tortoiseshell spectacles, named Asma Jilani Jahangir. She is in many ways a symbol of the values that the lawyers are fighting for. Pakistan is a notably patriarchal society, but Jahangir is its most visible and celebrated-as well as most vilified-human-rights lawyer. She has spent her professional life fighting for a secular civil society, challenging the mullahs and generals, and championing the rights of women at risk of "honor killing" and religious minorities accused of blasphemy. She has investigated alleged extrajudicial killings by the security forces, set up a shelter for vulnerable young women, and campaigned to end child labor. For Pakistan's liberals, she is a symbol of freedom and defiance, comparable to Aung San Suu Kyi, in Burma.

"These protests really have touched a chord," Jahangir shouted to me as the lawyers chanted around her. "There is so much pent-up anger. The country is beginning to stir."

Five hundred yards from the lawyers, a group of heavily bearded men wearing checked Arab kaffiyehs and black turbans were engaged in their own protest. These were the supporters of a right-wing alliance of religious parties, the Muttehida Majlis-e-Amal, or M.M.A., which has become a significant force in Pakistani electoral politics. The alliance's imposing patriarch, Liaqat Baloch, was standing on a jeep, exhorting his flag-waving supporters. "The friend of Bush is our enemy!" he roared. "The rulers should read the writing on the wall! Help give one last push to the falling wall! The only system that will come here is the system of the Prophet!"

The third group of protesters that day was not as conspicuous, but represented the greatest immediate threat to the government. Less than a mile from the Supreme Court, and not far from the headquarters of Pakistan's powerful intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence, or I.S.I., an angry crowd of students stood outside the Lal Masjid, or Red Mosque, a sprawling complex of prayer halls, classrooms, and dormitories. During the previous six months, the Lal Masjid had become the principal center of radical Islamist resistance to Musharraf's rule. The Islamists in the Lal Masjid were not interested in elections. They wanted to take direct and immediate revolutionary action against a government that they regarded as an American puppet, an infidel imposition on a state that should by rights be ruled entirely by Islamic law.

Under the leadership of two brothers, Maulana Abdul Aziz and Abdul Rashid Ghazi, the Lal Masjid had also become a base for Taliban-style vigilante squads, headed by fearsome, stick-wielding, burka-clad young women, which had been pouring out of the mosque and its two madrassas, one for men, one for women. For months, these women had been calling for the establishment of full Sharia

law and the closing down of all “dens of vice.” Jokes in English-language newspapers about “chicks with sticks” were quickly abandoned as the women began kidnapping suspected prostitutes, threatening video-store owners, and making bonfires of books, videocassettes, and DVDs that they regarded as un-Islamic. For months, the security forces did nothing to stop them, even after the women kidnapped policemen and ransacked government buildings, while the two brothers threatened holy war, and even issued a fatwa denouncing a female cabinet minister who had been photographed receiving a hug from a French skydiving instructor.

The Lal Masjid was also allegedly sheltering militants from some of Pakistan’s most dangerous jihadi groups, so when I went to visit, in May, I took the precaution of arriving with a friend who is the owner of Mr. Books, Islamabad’s best bookshop. He had known Abdul Rashid Ghazi since Ghazi was a left-wing student activist at Islamabad’s leading university, Quaid-i-Azam. We were politely led inside the mosque by three men, two with walkie-talkies and the third with a Kalashnikov, and invited to sit on a carpet. Ghazi, in John Lennon-style glasses and a knitted woollen hat, looked more like an old hippie than like any sort of Islamic firebrand. As we sipped tea, Ghazi, speaking eloquently in idiomatic English, described his campaign to get rid of Musharraf’s élitist and pro-American government and replace it with a more egalitarian Islamic regime.

According to Ghazi, the women in his madrassa reflected the true feelings of most Pakistanis, and particularly their resentment of the United States’ influence over Musharraf. “After 9/11, Musharraf made an abrupt change in our policy that was not supported by the people of Pakistan,” Ghazi said. “The attack on Afghanistan caused a lot of resentment, and in the name of the war on terror many innocent people were killed. In the name of ‘enlightened moderation’ vulgarity has been promoted—women running in marathons, brothels, pornography in CD shops. . . . All these things have been accumulating in the minds and in the hearts of the people of Pakistan. What we are voicing is the desires of the people. The system is the root of all the problems. . . . The rulers are living a life of luxury while thousands of innocent children have empty stomachs and can’t even get basic necessities.”

Six weeks later, Ghazi was dead. In early July, Musharraf’s government, after months of apparently ignoring the regular provocations issued by the radicals in the mosque, suddenly laid siege to the Lal Masjid. Ten days into the siege, after negotiations failed, commandos from the Army’s Special Services Group, backed by hundreds of troops, stormed the complex. Abdul Rashid Ghazi was killed in the basement of the building on July 10<sup>th</sup>, allegedly in the crossfire between his men and the commandos. Officially, seventy-six militants and eleven soldiers were also killed; local TV stations and newspapers gave figures almost double that. Although Pakistan is an unusually turbulent society, nothing like this had ever happened in the capital before.

Ghazi had predicted that any violent end to the siege would help speed an Islamic revolution in Pakistan. “We have a firm belief in God that our blood will lead to a revolution,” he said in a statement issued three days before his death. “God willing, Islamic revolution will be the destiny of this nation.”

**All this upheaval** would have been unimaginable even six months ago Islamabad has long been viewed as a dull city where lobbyists and industrialists bribed politicians, and civil servants shuffled papers and wove great cocoons of red tape amid huge concrete courthouses, ministries, and palaces— sort of Islamized version of the center of Washington, D.C., air-dropped into the foothills of the Himalayas.

Since 1999, when Musharraf seized power in a bloodless coup—he is still Commander-in-Chief of the Army—promising to bring “true” democracy, law and order, and economic revival, Islamabad has been unusually quiet, even by its own somnolent standards; indeed, across the country the

government has faced surprisingly little opposition. So disastrous were the tenures of Musharraf's two democratic predecessors—Benazir Bhutto, who has confronted a litany of corruption charges, and Nawaz Sharif, her inept, unpopular, and autocratic successor, who brought the country to the edge of economic catastrophe—that until recently the only strenuous opposition to Musharraf came from extreme Islamists, who tried twice to assassinate him in suicide bombings.

The country's economic recovery has been perhaps the most remarkable achievement of Musharraf's government. Under Shaukat Aziz, a former vice-president of Citibank and now the Prime Minister, Pakistan is enjoying a construction and consumer boom, with annual economic growth of around seven per cent and one of Asia's best-performing stock markets (some of this prosperity has been generated by the lifting of trade restrictions and by substantial debt relief from the United States and other countries after September 11<sup>th</sup>). The effects can be seen everywhere: in new shopping centers and restaurant complexes, in building sites, in advertisements for the latest laptops and iPods. In 2003, there were fewer than three million cell-phone users in Pakistan; today there are nearly fifty million.

Despite elections in 2002 that were denounced by journalists and civil-rights groups as having been openly rigged, liberals have remained largely supportive of Musharraf, or at least quiescent, while most of the country's mullahs, normally stridently outspoken, have been relatively subdued. But Musharraf's treatment of the Chief Justice—and the lawyers' refusal to accept it—finally broke the eight-year status quo.

Few are convinced by Musharraf's explanation for his firing of the Chief Justice; many people believe that Chaudhry was suspended for his independence of mind—in particular, for blocking the sale of a state-owned steel mill, from which some government officials reportedly would have profited. It appears to be the first time that the judiciary had confronted one of the great scandals of Pakistani public life: the military's profitable economic empire. In a recent book, "Military Inc.," the political scientist Ayesha Siddiqi estimated that the military controls business assets of more than twenty billion dollars, with interests ranging from cement and dredging to the manufacture of corn flakes and the baking of bread. It controls a third of all heavy manufacturing in the country and owns nearly twelve million acres of land. As Asma Jahangir put it to me, "The Army is into every business in this country. Except hairdressing."

The Chief Justice had also raised the issue of the number of political activists who have disappeared and are thought to be held by the state intelligence agencies. Most damaging of all was his presumed opposition to Musharraf's continuing as both President and Army chief. Elections are due to be held soon, and Musharraf will require a constitutional amendment to continue to double as President and Commander-in-Chief. The military government needed a pliant Chief Justice if Musharraf was to stay in office without removing his uniform.

Imran Khan, the country's great sporting hero, who retired from cricket to enter politics and founded a party called Tehrik-e-Insaaf, or the Movement for Justice, in 1996, initially believed that Musharraf seriously intended to reform the system. But he has joined the lawyers. "This is the first time in our history that the judiciary has asserted its independence," he told me. "Normally, it just sides with whoever is in power. Change is irreversible. You can't have prosperity without genuine democracy and an independent judiciary."

Yet it is widely recognized that the lawyers' protests may be severely endangering the stability of the country. It is not just the violent Islamists of the Lal Masjid who have taken advantage of President Musharraf's predicament. The country's powerful religious parties have also tried to use the turbulence for their own ends. Historically, the parties received only a tiny fraction of the vote. That situation began to change, however, after the United States invaded Afghanistan. In the election of

October, 2002, the M.M.A. ran a successful campaign under the slogan “It is a war between Islam and the American infidel.” Several of its parliamentary candidates had been Taliban commanders. The religious parties more than doubled their representation. The M.M.A. won by a large margin in the North-West Frontier Province, one of the conservative areas bordering Afghanistan, and succeeded in forming a coalition government in Baluchistan. Both provinces now have pro-Islamist governments.

Some fear that Islamists could hijack the protests of the lawyers’ movement, just as they hijacked the civil-rights protests against the Shah in Iran in 1979. The day after the demonstration in Islamabad, I asked Rashed Rahman, the editor of the *Post*, in Lahore, what he thought about the attempts of the lawyers—and particularly their spokesperson that day, Asma Jahangir—to bring down Musharraf’s government.

“Asma Jahangir is brave and fearless,” he said. “She has stood up for all the right causes. She has huge credibility, and has achieved what she has through integrity and hard work. She is also a great friend. But her political judgment is another matter. She is a supporter of democracy, right or wrong, and the situation in Pakistan is extremely complex at the moment. Will there be an Islamic revolution? I personally don’t think the Islamists are on the verge of seizing power, but we cannot ignore the growing power of the militants. Asma is an idealist, and sometimes in this part of the world it is better to be a realist.”

**Lahore lies** four hours’ drive south of Islamabad. During the seventeenth century, from the fort of Lahore, the Mughal emperors ruled most of India all of what is now Pakistan, and large areas of Afghanistan. At the time, Lahor dwarfed both London and Paris; in “Paradise Lost,” the great Mughal metropoli is revealed to Adam after the Fall as one of the future marvels of divine creation Today, strung between the marble domes of the Mughal mosques in the Old City and the orderly colonial townscape of the Mall, Lahore is not only the most attractive city in Pakistan but also the most artistic and intellectual.

Asma Jahangir was born here in 1952, five years after the creation of Pakistan as a homeland for the Muslims of India, and it remains her base. Driving through the city to her house, I found it striking to see billboard after billboard filled with beautiful Pakistani models, all with their heads uncovered—something that would be unthinkable in the frontier provinces.

Mohsin Hamid, whose novel “The Reluctant Fundamentalist” was an international best-seller earlier this year, recently wrote about the dramatic cultural and economic revival of Pakistan. He had worked as a consultant in Manhattan for several years, and returned home to find Lahore unrecognizable. He was particularly struck by “the incredible new world of media that had sprung up”:

*I knew, of course, that the government of Musharraf had opened the media to private operators. But I had not until then realized how profoundly things had changed.*

Not just television, but also private radio stations and newspapers have flourished in Pakistan over the past few years. The result is an unprecedented openness. . . . Young people are speaking and dressing differently. Views both critical and supportive of the government are voiced with breathtaking frankness in an atmosphere remarkably lacking in censorship. Public space, the common area for culture and expression that had been so circumscribed in my childhood, has now been vastly expanded. “The Vagina Monologues” was recently performed on stage in Pakistan to standing ovations.

When I arrived at Jahangir’s home, in the residential district of Gulberg, I asked her whether

Musharraf's rule had really been so dictatorial: wasn't it in some ways more liberal than the democratic governments that preceded it?

"Well, it's true that dictators have got more sophisticated at masking their military rule these days," she replied. "Musharraf's government has a civilian face—there are still elections and assemblies—and he has come to believe his own propaganda that he really is a democrat. There is a degree of press freedom. And it is true that these days we have better communications than used to be possible under military rule, thanks to the Internet and mobile phones. It's all more complex than it used to be."

We were in Jahangir's sitting room, and she curled her feet up beneath her on the sofa. "And don't misunderstand me," she said. "I have no illusions about our elected politicians. Pakistani democracy is anything but perfect. In fact I can't think of any other country in the world where the benefits of democracy are less immediately clear—even Nepal."

Jahangir's house was built in the nineteen-sixties but looks like something from the twenties, with beautiful dark-wood panelling and elegant chintz sofas. There are similar properties throughout Gulberg, where large houses with tropical gardens, carefully watered lawns, and expansive pools lie hidden behind high brick walls. It was a reminder of one of the paradoxes of Pakistan. Although the country is frequently depicted in the international media as a failed state, and India, its neighbor and rival, as a burgeoning superpower, the distinction is not always so clear on the ground.

Jahangir's mischievous affability and charm in private form a contrast with her steely public image and, along with her striking self-confidence, identify her immediately as a child of the Pakistani upper middle class. This was the élite that reaped the full benefits of a system that has always been more accommodating to the rich than its equivalent in India, where socialist laws, land-reform acts, and punitive taxes quickly reduced the status of the landowning classes after the departure of the British, in 1947.

The family of Malik Jilani, Jahangir's father, had extensive property in both the city and its rural hinterland; her grandfather even had a stud farm. But her father chose to enter government service, and much of her childhood was spent in his official bungalow, in Sahiwal, in the fertile plains of the Punjab, to the southwest of Lahore, where he was a senior local bureaucrat.

"In those days, a man of my father's position was God," she said. "It was a small town, and my mother relished the status my father's job gave her. We had a lovely bungalow, our own tonga"—horse and carriage—"and I remember having the only film projector in the district. It was a great cause of envy for my friends, though we had only one film, 'The Fabulous Señorita,' which we watched over and over again."

Jahangir remembers her childhood as idyllic, yet from an early age her life was touched by the anxieties, disappointments, and disillusionment that afflicted Pakistan from its birth. In 1958, General Ayub Khan seized power in the course of Pakistan's first military coup. To everyone's surprise, Jahangir's father, a man who until then had shown more interest in living the good life than in politics, resigned from the Civil Service in protest. "My mother was horrified and asked him why," she told me. "He replied that once a military government came it was a declaration that civilian institutions have failed. He was not really an idealist by nature, but he was strangely committed to the question of democracy and human rights."

The family moved back to Lahore, and Jahangir's father joined the opposition to the military government, becoming increasingly vocal in his criticisms. Life for the family changed: the secret service moved in across the street from their house, Jahangir told me, and began recording the license plates of visitors' cars; soon people became reluctant to visit. In 1961, Malik Jilani was arrested. "They came in the middle of the night with torches," she recalled. "Hordes of police surrounded the house and banged on the doors. It was terrifying. My young sister was crying, but

my father appeared completely calm, and gave orders for the valet to bring the police tea. I remember him saying ‘Ta-ta’ very lightly to us as he got into the police van.”

It was the first of a succession of arrests and prison terms, and Jahangir and her mother spent much of their time in court trying to challenge the various detention orders. On one occasion, after her father had witnessed what the family believed was a government-sponsored killing, there was an attempt to assassinate him. A man who looked like Jilani was shot dead walking up to the family house, and a second man was critically wounded. Jahangir, who was only thirteen at the time, was alone in the house with her two sisters, and had to take the badly wounded man to the hospital. Two years later, Ayub Khan confiscated the family’s land in an attempt to pressure Jilani to stop his opposition activities. It didn’t work.

*“He would go into prison smiling and come out smiling,” Jahangir said. “It was only in the nineteen-eighties, when he was dying of cancer and rambling because of the drugs that the doctors gave him, that we discovered he had been disgustingly tortured.”*

In 1969, at the age of seventeen, Jahangir began her own pro-democracy rebellion against Ayub Khan. She was a leader of a women’s demonstration—one of the largest in the history of Pakistan—and risked gunfire to climb the gate of the Punjab governor’s house to hoist a symbolic black flag. She was temporarily suspended from college. A few years later, she began studying law, teaching herself at home, as her professors did not think it suitable for women to attend law lectures. “I had been very impressed with the courts we visited to see my father,” she said. “The judges wearing wigs, the lawyers, the legal arguments—it was all exciting stuff for a kid.”

Although it was not unusual for a woman of Jahangir’s class to take up a profession—a number of Pakistan’s senior editors and politicians are upper-middle-class women—it was almost unknown for women to enter the law. In 1980, Jahangir set up a practice with her sister Hina Jilani and two other friends, which was the first free legal-aid center in Pakistan; it was also the first all-woman legal practice. Named A.G.H.S., after the initials of the four partners, it was soon dubbed Hags by the male legal establishment. The practice and its reputation quickly grew; by 1982, both Jahangir and Jilani were Advocates of the High Court.

**The establishment** of Jahangir’s firm coincided with a new period of ultraconservative military rule, under General Zia ul-Haq. Zia took power in 1977, in a coup that displaced Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the father of Benazir Bhutto. Although Zia became a hero in Washington when, in 1979, he gave full support to the United States after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, it was he who brought about Pakistan’s rapid Islamization. The country had been set up as homeland for Indian Muslims, but it had been a more or less secular state, as envisaged by its founder, the clean-shaven, tweed-jacketed, and Anglicized Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

Zia was responsible for initiating the alliance between the conservative military officers and the reactionary mullahs, both groups that tended to be drawn from the middle classes, in contrast to politicians, who mostly came from feudal landholding backgrounds. When Pakistan’s Islamic radicals joined the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan, their recruitment was controlled by the I.S.I. and funded by both the C.I.A. and the Saudi intelligence agency. Soon the I.S.I. became the paymaster of myriad jihadi groups. These were intended to be selectively deployed in Afghanistan and, later, Kashmir, where Pakistan has been engaged in a long-running dispute with India. The Pakistani Army saw the jihadis as a cost-effective means of dominating Afghanistan while keeping the Indian Army bogged down in Kashmir. As Hamid Gul, the director of the I.S.I. at the time, told me, “If they encourage the Kashmiris, it’s understandable. The Kashmiri people have risen up, and it is the national purpose of Pakistan to help liberate them. . . . If the jihadis go out and contain India, tying down their Army on their own soil, for a legitimate cause, why should we not support them?”

Zia also transformed Pakistan's domestic policies, changing Jinnah's vision of an Anglicized Pakistan forever. Two years after the coup, he established the Hudood Ordinances of Sharia law. The Ordinances discriminated severely against women, asserting that women were not allowed to testify in cases involving crimes of the highest magnitude. They also made any sex outside marriage—known as zina—a punishable offense. Rape became difficult to prove and victims were often charged with adultery and imprisoned or flogged.

Jahangir helped organize protest marches against the Hudood Ordinances, and she was arrested and sent to prison for a month in 1983. There she met many women who had been arrested under the new laws, and, on her release, she took up their cases. She helped overturn a sentence of imprisonment and flogging issued against a blind woman who was raped and then charged with zina. In 1986, she helped establish the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. The H.R.C. defended women accused of adultery. It also took on a growing number of blasphemy cases filed against Ahmadis, a heterodox Muslim sect, and Christians: a single accusation could result in execution.

Jahangir's position as a human-rights lawyer made her especially vulnerable to the violent religiosity that had become more evident in the country. In 1994, Jahangir won the freedom of a fourteen-year-old Christian boy who had been sentenced to death for blasphemy. Soon afterward, her family compound was attacked by a group of jihadis who were determined to kill her as a defender of infidels and an enemy of Islam. They broke into one of the houses in the compound and took the family of one of Jahangir's sisters hostage. Jahangir managed to get the police; the siege ended when the jihadis escaped.

In 1999, two people were killed at Jahangir's office. A woman named Samia Sarwar, from Peshawar, who wanted a divorce from her abusive husband, was hiding from her family in the H.R.C.'s shelter. Under Jahangir's guidance, Sarwar agreed to discuss the situation with her mother. But the mother showed up at Jahangir's office with a hired assassin posing as her driver. As the two entered the office, the assassin shot Sarwar in the head. The assassin was killed by a policeman as he attempted to flee the building. Yet Sarwar's mother was never charged with being an accomplice to murder. Following the strictures of Sharia, the heirs of the victim—in this case the abandoned husband and the two children—exercised their right to forgive the murderer. It was a graphic illustration of the way that Sharia can be twisted to legalize the murder of women deemed to have "shamed" their families.

"Honor killings are not a specifically Islamic tradition," Jahangir said firmly. "They are just a bad tradition that must be stopped." Before Zia came to power, honor killings were restricted mainly to Pakistan's tribal regions and other remote areas. But the practice has since spread to the rest of the country, and is now widely seen as something linked with religion as well as with the old notions of tribal honor. "I was born a Muslim and that is still my identity," Jahangir continued. "Islam is no more violent or fanatical than any other religion—it's just that many Muslim countries have politicized religion for the benefit of the rulers. There are Christian fanatics and Hindu fanatics, too—put a gun in the hands of any of them and they will terrorize people. Religion should be something personal. It should not be the concern of the state, and no religion has a right to degrade women or erode their human dignity.

"I always ask these Islamists, 'What kind of justice do you want? Give me specifics.' Look how selectively Sharia law is applied here. When Zia started his Islamization, it was aimed first at women, non-Muslims, and the poor. That served his purpose. It is never invoked against the élite—we've never had an Islamic banking system here, for example. The poor understand this. I remember one woman in jail telling me, 'If there is a God, it's a God of the rich people.' It's not about faith. It's about political strategies."

**The question of** Pakistan's future is complicated by a fundamental flaw in the political system. Real democracy has never thrived here, at least in part because the landowning class remains the principal social base from which politicians emerge. In general, the educated middle class—which in India gained control soon after independence—in Pakistan is still largely excluded from the political process. In many of the more backward parts of Pakistan, the local feudal zamindar, or landowner, can expect his people to vote for his chosen candidate. The Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid told me, "In some constituencies, if the feudals put up their dog as a candidate, that dog would get elected with ninety-nine per cent of the vote." Such loyalty can be enforced. Many of the biggest zamindars are said to have private prisons, and some have private militias.

Behind Pakistan's swings between military government and democracy lies a surprising continuity of interests: to some extent, the industrial, military, landowning, and bureaucratic élites are all interrelated and look after one another. Recent rumors of secret negotiations between Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto—who, though in exile, continues to lead the Pakistan People's Party—are typical of the way the civilian and military élites have shared power. (Both Musharraf and Bhutto have denied such rumors, but some have suggested that an alliance between them is something that the United States would welcome, in the hope of uniting the two pro-American groupings in the country.)

This closed nature of the Pakistani political system has contributed to the strikingly poor performance of its democratic politicians. As Jahangir put it, "If Pakistan's dictators are sometimes less dictatorial than one might imagine, then its democrats have proved consistently less democratic than they should be."

In 1995, during Benazir Bhutto's government, the anti-corruption organization Transparency International named Pakistan one of the three most corrupt countries in the world. Bhutto and her husband, Asif Zardari—widely known as "Mr. 10%"—faced allegations of plundering the country; charges were filed in Pakistan, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. (Bhutto has consistently asserted her innocence. Two cases in Pakistan were eventually decided in her favor, and a case in Switzerland is still ongoing.)

It was difficult to imagine Bhutto's successor, Nawaz Sharif, making as big a mess of things, but he was soon harassing his opponents, physically intimidating the judiciary, and threatening journalists. In May of 1999, Najam Sethi, the editor of the *Friday Times*, was abducted from his home; a month later, after a series of demonstrations, in which Jahangir played a leading role, and an international campaign, he was released. Meanwhile, the economy came close to collapse.

"A return to democracy would certainly not be an instant miracle for this country," Jahangir told me. "But it would be a start. This military government has no direction, no plan, no schedule. In terms of human rights, this government is worse than any civilian government we've ever had. We estimate that there have been about six hundred disappeared since 2002. They are usually picked up by plainclothesmen in four-wheel drives—sometimes there are policemen with them, sometimes not. If the victims are ever seen again, they invariably say that they have been tortured with electric shocks, beaten, given injections, hung upside down by their ankles." (The government has claimed that "all efforts are being made to find the missing persons.")

Jahangir lit a cigarette, and continued. "Since 9/11 and Guantánamo, the security forces feel they have a free hand," she said. "And then there is the interference of the executive in the judiciary, which has been constant and unbearable. The sacking of the Chief Justice was the final straw. If we lose this one, it is all over for the rule of law in this country."

**Pakistan today** in many ways resembles pre-revolutionary Iran. cosmopolitan middle class is

prospering, yet for the great majority of poorer Pakistanis life remains intolerably hard and access to justice or education is distant hope: just 1.8 per cent of Pakistan's G.N.P is spent on education. The published literacy rate is forty-nine per cent, and in some areas the rate is estimated to be as low as fourteen per cent. Instead of investing adequately in education, Musharraf's government is spending money on a fleet of American F-16s for the Air Force. Health care and other social services for the poor have also been neglected, in contrast to the public services that benefit the wealthy, such as highways and airports—many of which are world-class

It is this disparity perhaps as much as anything else that has fuelled the growth of the Islamist religious parties. Ayesha Siddiqi told me, "There is a breakdown of effective government. The political parties have all failed to create an environment where the poor can get what they need from the state. The laws are always twisted for the rich; in fact, there are effectively no laws for them. So the poor have begun to look to alternatives for justice." She went on to point out, "The religious parties and Sharia are increasingly seen as the one source of justice for them. In the long term, flaws in the system will create more room for the fundamentalists."

Paralleling the rise of the religious parties as the only effective opposition to the entrenched Pakistani élite—widely perceived as corrupt, Westernized, and decadent—there has been a growing number of Taliban-style Islamist vigilantes, particularly in the M.M.A.-ruled North-West Frontier Province. In the past few months, a rash of suicide bombings—something previously almost unknown in Pakistan—have left scores of people dead in the frontier region.

As the events at the Lal Masjid show, Musharraf has been unable to act effectively against the Talibanization of the country. Indeed, the presence of so many heavy weapons in a known center of militancy in the heart of Islamabad suggests at the very least that the intelligence agencies were turning a blind eye to what was going on, and has led to much speculation about the reasons for this. Was Musharraf trying to scare his Western backers by showing how much worse things could get if he was to go? And why, when the decision was made to confront the militants, was it done so heavy-handedly? As Jahangir told me during the bloody storming of the complex, the incident exemplified Musharraf's indecisiveness and his managerial ineptitude. He allowed the crisis to fester for months, she said, and then, without making much of an effort to solve the problem by peaceful methods, he sent in the tanks. "He didn't even attempt to cut off the water and electricity until the very end," she observed. "Any layperson can see how clumsily it was handled."

Dependent on the support of the mullahs as well as on that of the Americans, Musharraf is in an almost impossible position. He has replaced many of the more pro-Islamist I.S.I. generals, and he appears in many ways to be cooperating with the United States in the hunt for Al Qaeda suspects. But the Army continues to use jihadis in Kashmir, and the extent to which Taliban units are openly operating out of Pakistan's tribal areas implies that the I.S.I. is not doing all it can to prevent the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan. Musharraf cannot have the blessings of both the Americans and the Islamists, and he cannot continue to dismantle democratic organizations while claiming to be the savior of democracy.

Few people are predicting a happy resolution to this increasingly dangerous situation, yet Jahangir remains optimistic. "Musharraf is rapidly losing the minimum respect that gives you the moral authority to rule a country," she said. "We have the resilience to create new institutions and new systems. We have enough people of integrity. Given an opportunity, political parties can make a difference and new political leaders can emerge. But we civilians have to run the government ourselves. At the moment, it is not that the country has a garrison; it is that the garrison has a country.

"However flawed democracy here is, it is still the only answer," she continued. "Once there is a proper political movement, the religious parties will become marginalized. I am not at all gloomy.

These protests have been a wake-up call.”

Shortly after our conversation, I talked to Jugnu Mohsin, the publisher of the *Friday Times*, and the wife of its editor, Najam Sethi. “Is Asma naïve?” she asked. “It is true that the lawyers’ movement, if it destroys Musharraf, could create more problems than it solves. The fall of Musharraf could well lead to the rise of violent political Islam. I certainly believe that no civilian government on its own can put that genie back in the bottle. But, if idealism is naïveté, then so be it. It is ideals that move history forward—think of Gandhi or Martin Luther King. Many thought they were politically naïve, but it was they, not the realists, who succeeded in changing the course of history.”

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**P.S.**

\* From The Nation, July 23, 2007:

[http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/07/23/070723fa\\_fact\\_dalrymple?currentPage=1](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2007/07/23/070723fa_fact_dalrymple?currentPage=1)

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