

UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSES OF MILITANCY IN PAKISTAN'S FRONTIER

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Abstract

In an attempt to assess the causes of militancy in KP & FATA, an empirical study was conducted in form of interviews of highest state officials and civil society leaders. The group highlighted that the political causes were linked to the inefficacy and outdatedness of the Jirga system of decision making; the absence of local governance in the tribal areas; the inefficacy of the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR); People's lack of trust in the prevalent system and lack of accountability of the elected national (MNAs) and provincial (MPAs) parliamentarians. Economically, the common elements that came out in most group interviews were lack of adequate infrastructure for economic activity; underutilization and mal distribution of resources; population explosion and lack of attention to agricultural development. Social factors deemed responsible for militancy were atomization and the breakup of the traditional order; Intolerance attributable to religion (wahabi factor, sectarianism); intolerance leading to social marginalization of the Pushtuns. Security reasons for militancy were state neglect of these areas; a contention between groups that held security forces in the area as the problem and others maintained that use of military to clear up the extremists is the solution. Finally, almost without exception, all groups pointed out to the 'foreign factor' as the biggest cause of this crisis. The role of several pivotal countries such as USA, China, India, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey was also discussed. USA, India and Saudi Arabia were seen as the spoilers of peace, while China, Turkey and Iran were seen as the promoters of peace.

Keywords: Civil, State, Military, Society, Pakistan, Frontier, Militancy, Pushtun.

Introduction

Thenon-settled tribal Pushtun belt of Pakistan has never been governed directly by the center and not provincial government since the end of the British colonial area in this region. According to the modern understanding of statecraft, this region in recent history can be conceived as a stateless society in the sense that the writ of the Pakistani state wasn't there because of large ungoverned or semi-governed spaces. This was not accidental but under the policy of 'strategic neglect' aimed at safeguarding the northern/western borders of Pakistan using Pushtun tribes.¹ Between 1947 and 1977, the Political Agent

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(PA) appointed by the state administered this area in consortium with local *maliks* and elders through the system of *jirga* (tribal consultation) in matters of dispensation of justice and litigation of crimes. Most Pushtuns agree that there was no out of the ordinary turmoil for three decades until the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan which ushered forth a new era of global power rivalry in the region between USA and USSR.

Although the inhabitants of this area have always borne weapons (an element of Pushtun culture), but it hadn't heretofore militarized as it did in the aftermath of the Afghan-Soviet war. The Soviet defeat and the US withdrawal led to a civil war in which the Taliban (second generation Mujahideen) surfaced as the new state of Afghanistan whose Islamic worldview was partially borrowed from the Saudi/wahabi doctrine. Between 1989 and 2001 there was enormous weapons proliferation in this region, but by and large the Taliban state established their territorial control, disarmed the opposing groups in their held areas, removed landmines from many parts of their country and reduced poppy production to zero. Since 2001 however, the United States occupied Afghanistan and re-militarization of the region took place once again. This has produced a fresh wave of extremism for the adjacent Pushtun regions of Pakistan.

The extremist elements destroyed the traditional structure of governance in these areas, generally known as Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The FATA region and recently also the non-FATA Pushtun regions belonging to the province of Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (KP) have also seen this wave of a fundamentalist take over at places such as Swat, which the Pakistani Army successfully cleared and re-established its writ. The army has undertaken a similar operation in the sensitive Waziristan area at the behest of US and Western pressure. Pakistani military has quite successfully cleared these areas in addition to defeating the foreign supported insurgency in Karachi.

Political Causes of Crisis in Pakistan's Frontier

My first cluster of questions was to investigate the particular causes of crisis. I began with investigating the political causes in order to know whether the government was effective in meeting the expectations of citizens of FATA and KP. These questions also sought to know how the local government representatives were selected and what constraints were there, particularly on the local level executive, the strength and efficacy of the judicial system and

whether constitutional reforms were needed to address the structural causes of conflict.

The main causal factors identified as the crucial 'common denominators' were: *the inefficacy and outdatedness of the Jirga system of decision making along with its concatenation of the PA and the local malik; the utter absence of local governance in the tribal areas; the inefficacy of the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR), FATA's non-mainstream status; People's lack of trust in the prevalent system and lack of accountability of the elected national (MNAs) and provincial (MPAs) parliamentarians.*

Historically, the North-West Frontier Province NWFP² had an unusual political set up from rest of the country. It was divided into mainland NWFP (now KP) the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the Provincially Administered Tribal Areas (PATA) and the Frontier Regions (FR). Whereas the KP uses a mix of anglo-saxon law and shariah as the codes of law (like the rest of Pakistan) with more or less the same administrative structure, the other three regions have variable political structures. The common structure of the latter is a Political Agent (PA) who is the administrative liaison between the federal government and the tribal elders or chiefs. The law administered there is called the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR), arguably a draconian set of laws suitable for the British but not for post-independence Pakistan. Most litigation and settlement of disputes that took place in the pre-crisis KP used *Pukhtun-wali* (the Pushtun socio-legal code of law and behavior) *rawwayat*, i.e., (customary law) and the Islamic Shariah.

The above arrangement was shaped by the British for the purposes of their colonial state. Pakistan perpetuated this set up for almost three decades until the beginning of its dissolution upon the Soviet invasion. Most respondents argued that this system has now outlived its validity and is only there in name. They argue that while this system worked well for the last century, the pillars on which it was based have now caved in. It has been reduced to a subverted form of the original set up and won't deliver anymore to the pushtun public. First pillar was the *malik* or the tribal chief. Respondents stated that the *malik* has either been killed by the *talib* or he has simply absconded. The other pillar was the PA who is too afraid, politically impotent and ashamed to come out of his office and perform his function in isolation of a consensually elected *malik*. Thus the *jirga* (consultative apparatus for dispute-solving/planning) has been subverted or at

places imploded. What we see is an earliest transition of the Pushtun society from being a community towards a mass society. This transition is a very thorny process that requires the presence of the state or at least one 'legitimate' group that has a monopoly on the use of force. In the absence of such a group (state or freedom fighters), the conditions can lead to a civil war which can potentially inflame the region.

Most respondents agreed that there is a need to mainstream the entire KP. The four-tiered administrative set up is discriminating and a systemic factor in promoting this crisis. They argued for a uniform rule of law in the entire country. Without any exception, all groups asked for the abolition of FCR and bringing back the FATA into the national life of Pakistan. Most respondents argued that the PA behaves like a king and he is synonymous of a mixture of an American Police sheriff and the bandit in the Wild West! Most groups upheld that the PA is in cahoots with the governor and the tribal chief, and that he was corrupt, giver and receiver of bribes, and embezzler of funds. The security forces in contrast argued the opposite. They said that the system is inefficient but it is working for now. However, they also believed that eventually FCR should be abolished and mainstreaming of FATA with the rest of provincial and national life is imperative.

The security forces respondents believed that the corruption was at the sub-PA level, between the PA and the *maliks*. PA was not extorting money from the tribal area to the governor's office, he was taking money from the governor's office and giving it to tribal chiefs. In either case, the mainstreaming of FATA was deemed necessary by all groups without any exception. The Police force respondents stated that the politicians cannot do much in this area because they have their hands tied. People don't trust the system (as there is no MNA/MPA contact with their constituencies). This condition necessitates urgent reforms, but only reforms and plans short of deployment of funds on ground will not accomplish anything. The lack of absence of local governance in the tribal areas was attributed to the mentality and attitude of elected and state appointed official towards the people. The people are of the view that the government has the attitude of control through subjugation, rather than serving its people.

Economic Causes of Crisis in Pakistan's Frontier

The second set of questions dealt with understanding whether the economic causes were a factor in perpetuating the crisis. It was asked whether

rising income disparity between the rich and poor, between the local and national levels, and redistribution of resources were factors in exacerbating the crisis. The issue of parallel illegal economies and demographic explosion were also discussed.

Other than the most obvious factor of active insurgency and war, the common elements that came out in most group interviews were *lack of adequate infrastructure for economic activity; underutilization and mal distribution of resources; population explosion and lack of attention to agricultural development.*

Respondents bemoaned the lack of basic services that citizens of any country expect. FATA and KP are undoubtedly economically underdeveloped, but so are many other parts of Pakistan. However, the agriculture sector was pointed out to be the most important one to build on. But modern agriculture requires infrastructure of road, railroads, canals and electricity. None of these are there in FATA but they have been there in many other parts of KP. Like most states in the international arena, agricultural sector, if left alone without subsidies will burden the farmer to an extent that he will gradually begin to move to subsistence than maximization of output because of the law of diminishing returns. Subsidies to farmers, which unfortunately have been taken away subsequent to macroeconomic 'reforms' by international institutions therefore, are absolutely essential for developing this most crucial sector of economy because food security constitutes the first step towards self-reliance. Due to the lack of attention in this sector, people in the rice growing area have resorted to growing *Cannabis Sativa* (from which the narcotic *hashish* is made).

Now some people have privately installed tube wells and other methods of modern irrigation which has turned Waziristan into a green place, which suggests that if the state were to take active interest in supporting this crucial sector, it will most likely be a huge success. Intra-regional self-sufficiency in this sector is crucial for food security in the region. There was also a feeling on the behalf of some respondents that many in the Pushtun society want to be content with daily subsistence and with non-modern professions. I don't know to what extent this is true because it doesn't seem so in the urban areas. But it could be the mindset of people in the FATA region. Even if this is so, it makes the agricultural sector even more crucial because this sector could help them catapult into the agro-industry and its exports which could turn around fortunes for many. Currently, most areas are dependent on rain irrigation, which is good

against soil exhaustion but does not fulfill the consumption level of a modern mass society. At any rate, sustainable agriculture that has minimal reliance on the use of fossil fuels is a good eco-sustainable model for the whole country and certainly suitable for this region of Pakistan given its culture and demography.

The problem of wealth accumulation is a universal problem linked with modern capitalist economy and world system and FATA and KP are not immune from it either. Some respondents argued that whereas the whole of the country was facing economic challenges (as well as the global economy itself), one could narrow down the concentration of wealth in districts such as Swat in the hands of a few individuals. Similarly, the universal macroeconomic debacle of mal distribution of resources was also pointed out. However, under-utilization of resources was special to this area of Pakistan alone.

Poverty and demographic explosion were also highlighted as causes, however, it is my contention (as well as that of some respondents that were outliers numerically) that these are more of effects of economic backwardness than causes. If poverty was the sole cause then South Punjab and parts of Sindh and Baluchistan would also experience similar crises. If population explosion was a causal factor across board, then China would also experience a similar phenomenon. Rather, poverty and population explosion should be seen as effects that reinforce the structural factors brought about by forces that have shaped the current culture. Militancy does not originate from poverty; however, poverty makes the land fertile for militancy. Poor are especially vulnerable to being janissaries and mercenaries. The militants' recruitment offers money to buy the youngsters who are lured by excitement, adventure, promise of identity assertion and above all financial security.

Social Causes of Crisis in Pakistan's Frontier

In this section, I asked if there was evidence of systematic marginalization of any ethnic groups, and whether the traditional kinship/community structures could serve to ameliorate the crisis. Of particular heuristic interest was to understand the role of religion in relation to this crisis; its use by militants or by the state and understanding its role in education and propaganda.

Most causes identified in this section were: *Atomization and the breakup of the traditional order; Intolerance attributable to religion (wahabi factor,*

sectarianism); Intolerance because of talibanization leading to social marginalization of the Pushtuns.

Many respondents were of the view that there was re-configuration of Pushtun society in the process. Pushtun society has been one of the latecomers to modernity because of being isolated due to their geography and their unique political arrangement with the state of Pakistan. With the cities modernizing earlier than the hinterland, the upper classes of Pushtun society moved to the cities initially while retaining contact with their rural areas (as it is still there in many parts of KP), but gradually many lost a functional contact with their areas due to land changing hands from the traditional elite to the new middle classes as well as the new moneyed class. The latter includes the *gujjar* minority as well as the lower trading classes, both of whom are looked down upon in the traditional Pushtun society.

The new classes do not have the 'credentials of nobility' like the old class. The old rural elite has transformed into the new secular, ostensibly liberal urban elite, distanced from the people and quite westernized. Some respondents criticized Westernization of values through media as a cause, reaction to which is a swing towards religion. It is observable that the upper classes' values are being influenced by Hollywood, while the lower classes are being influenced by Bollywood. The respondents from media were especially of the view that the Pushtun society by large had a reactionary culture and due to elements alien to their traditional culture, there was a backlash which was not due to religion but it was legitimized by religion. It is my contention as well that it is not Taliban that has produced extremism; rather it is extremism that has produced the Taliban. The popularity of al-Huda and other religious groups in the Punjabi civil society is a factor that may be at play in the Pushtun areas as well, or for that matter the general resurgence of religion since the 1990s which so many experts have sought to explain. Part of the Pushtunistan crisis is due to the strategic use of religion by outside powers such as the USA and Saudi Arabia, but partly it could be due to the dissolution of traditional structures and a general loss of meaning in life which especially the Europeans have painfully experienced as a consequence of modernization.³

Most respondents in this group were of secular orientation which should not be assumed as a 'given' in Pakistan. Many respondents tend to argue that intolerance is because of religion. The extremists are intolerant because they

are religious entities imbibing the Wahabi doctrine of Islam. Whereas it is true that Wahabi/salafi understanding of Islam is angry, fundamentalist to quite an extent while also being anti-intellectual and anti-aesthetic. It may be important to bear in mind that it is not religion that has produced extremism, but it is extremism born out of suffering and injustice which has led to fundamentalist Islam, just as it has led to Hindu fascism, Political Zionism and the Christian Right.

As mentioned earlier, if it had been because of Islam, all of the Muslim world today would be extremist, which is not the case. It is also our contention that snatching religion or tempering with orthodoxy in the name of reform is a Pandora's box to be kept away from. The underlying causes are all political and we should jettison the possibility of a moral ban on religion. Most groups were quite right in pointing out that if you allow the extremist elements to participate in our national life, it will de-marginalize them and the specter of fundamentalism will gradually be ameliorated by the softer and gentler elements in religion. The predominant element in the responses to this set of questions was the confluence of religion, state's (mis)use of religion and its inability to deliver public goods as the main cause of the present crisis. If Islam was a factor to which they would reduce their analysis to, then Malaysia, Morocco and Turkey should also be experiencing similar conflicts in their regions.

Most respondents pointed out to the Zia regime as the origin and evolution of this phenomenon. Some mentioned at other instances that this development came at the behest of Pakistan's collusion with the United States during the cold war period in an effort to fight the communist onslaught in Afghanistan (suggesting by default that the causes may be political and not religious). This information is not new. It is common knowledge. Even the American Secretary of State has publicly acknowledged that the United States promoted Jihad to the Afghan Mujahideen to fight communism. Most respondents kept in tune with the most commonly accepted story of the origin of evolution and extremism to the Zia era. Support of Jihadism through madrassahs was the commonly accepted 'truth' of the modern liberal Pakistani.

I would like to contend that the origins of this phenomenon lie in the Bhutto period and not Zia period, in which massive middle class emigration happened from the Middle Eastern gulf countries. It was during Bhutto regime that the Ahmadis were declared *kafirs* (infidels) and not during Zia's regime. It

was during Bhutto period that earlier Shia-Sunni sectarian clashes began to take place. Whereas Zia's period saw the manifestation of this phenomenon, it was in the brew during the earlier regime.

International Causes of Crisis in Pakistan's Frontier

In this cluster, it was asked if the past experience in Afghanistan has contributed to the most current crisis and how will the new US strategy in Afghanistan impact Pakistan. We also sought to know if this conflict had any linkages with the conflict with Kashmir. Further, a list of regional and global nations were provided and asked which ones play a supportive role in crisis resolution in Pakistan. Also discussed were global/regional incentives that may sustain this crisis and whether Pakistan should accept foreign aid at the cost of its national sovereignty. Almost without exception, all groups pointed out to the *'foreign factor' as the biggest cause of this crisis; along with it the role of several pivotal countries such as USA, China, India, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey was also discussed. USA, India and Saudi Arabia were seen as the spoilers of peace, while China, Turkey and Iran were seen as the promoters of peace.*

There was almost no disagreement in all the groups that it is due to the foreign involvement because of which the entire region has been in turmoil. From the Soviet invasion to the NATO invasion of Afghanistan, things have progressively and steadily deteriorated. Even though the American presence was seen as the essential cause, there were mixed feelings in some groups whether the US should leave the region abruptly for the fear of a civil war in Afghanistan and its spill over affects in rest of South Asia. US's confrontational relations with Iran were also criticized. American support for the Saudis was also criticized.

Turkey and Iran were seen as the promoters of peace with minor reservations against Iran's efforts to circumvent the Wahabi influence from the Saudis that was exacerbating the Shia-Sunni sectarian crisis. China was most trusted by all groups and seen as an all-weather friend of Pakistan. Saudi Arabia was playing a dubious role. It was supporting militancy through the Taliban by giving them money and ideology. The respondents argued that it enjoyed American immunity as the Americans not only protected the Saudis in this factor; they were also talking to the Taliban through the Saudis. While supporting the agents of terrorism in the region, they were also supporting the Pakistani state and its security forces by financial bailouts. The security forces group also maintained that Saudi Arabia had realized that this policy had hit the

law of diminishing returns and may no longer benefit the Saudis. As for India, most groups were of the view that India was culpable of fueling the unrest in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Nearly all groups corroborated the fact that presence of the foreign global & regional actors has been there since the very beginning of Pakistan. In this light, if the Pakistanis see the Indians as adversaries with whom they have fought three wars, the Pakistani suspicions of India are justified. Lastly, peripheral role was also perceived to be played by Russia. Russia would like to see America bleed in Afghanistan and its subsequent withdrawal from the region which would reduce its status as a superpower incapable of enforcing its will on smaller nations. Russia hopes to see an end to the two decades of unipolarity and the rise of multipolarity in which Russia and China emerge as powerful actors.

Conclusion

The overall feeling in entire belt was that the older system of *jirgas*, *maliks* and Political Agents is now outdated. Kinships are still important, but we may not be able to resuscitate the old system at this point, and the only way that seems forward is the abolition of the FCR and integration of FATA into KP. A referendum should take place that re-integrates FATA into KP thereby redefining the administrative boundaries of this province. Economically, the area requires new strategy for development that would circumvent the problem of recruitment by the militants. However, it is noteworthy to state that albeit on all indicators of Pakistani national economy, the FRs, FATA and PATA are behind the rest of the country, but a Pushtun have relatively better standard of living than many other poor groups in Pakistan. Even inside Baluchistan, a Pushtun has better lifestyle than the native *Balochi*. Social causes of militancy are linked to the misuse of religion. The modern neo-Wahabi Islam is responsible for narrow outlook leading to sectarianism. However, it is still possible to mitigate fundamentalism through the still prevalent traditional understanding of Islam. Lastly, and most importantly, the United States, India and NATO are spoilers of peace, who also want to subvert the CPEC and OBOR. On the other hand, Iran, Pakistan, China, Turkey (and increasingly also Russia) want to see peace in Afghanistan for Eurasian connectivity and viability of CPEC and OBOR.

NOTES

- ¹ Although the Pakistani state gave free electricity to much of this area as a carrot to stay in the federation, it was due a confluence of factors that this area was never integrated into the mainstream. Main factor on the part of the Pakistani state was that it continued to govern with complacency and bureaucratic inertia inherited from the British period. Moreover, the 'strategic neglect' was that bringing development (such as road and railroad) could facilitate the citizens of this area, but it could also facilitate the invaders. For the same reason, military kept the Pakistan controlled Kashmir region inaccessible for potential Indian aggression. As the country gradually became addicted to foreign aid, many of its 'mainstream' areas also never developed so benefit of doubt can be given to the state for not developing them.
- ² KP is an unsuitable acronym for the Pushtun province which according to most Pushtuns should be called Pukhtunkhwa, and quite rightfully so. Just the name of this province symbolizes in the Pushtun mind a divorce between their geographical and ethnic identities. While the Punjabi has Punjab, Sindhis have Sindh, Baluchis have Baluchistan, the Pushtun does not have their Pushtunistan. Although this does not alter ground realities of the Pushtun, but it has led to psychological marginalization of Pushtun identity.
- ³ Dissolution of family, increasing disenchantment from life and anomie are elements sociologists agree are the byproducts of modern urban existence.