

Pakistan's show of strength..., or a further slide into fragility?

The full-blown offensive that was launched by the Pakistani armed forces at the end of April 2009 against the Taliban insurgents nestled in the Swat Valley was greeted with signs of relief and encouragement by the international community. For a short while, between the signing, two months earlier, of a controversial ceasefire agreement with the so-called local Pakistani Taliban group *Tahreek Nifaz e Sharia Mohammadi* – or Movement for the Implementation of Mohammedan Law (TNSM), and the move, at the beginning of April, of the same group into the adjacent district of Buner, Pakistan seemed doomed to get run over by Islamic fanatics. To protest against the apparent inaction of the Pakistani state, the international community had come out with strongly worded statements. US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, for instance, had accused the Pakistani government of “basically abdicating to the Taliban and the extremists”, and defined the Taliban menace as an “existential threat posed to the state of Pakistan”.¹

The road towards a “final” showdown

International pressure to take stiff action against the dangerous spreading of the Taliban “disease” deeper into Pakistani territory, combined with growing concerns of the country’s population about the real reasons behind the government’s indecisiveness or unwillingness to counter this expansion, are probably the main factors that triggered the intervention of the army. The time had apparently come to show that the Pakistani state was not going to tolerate any further challenge to its authority. In that regard, the Taliban’s attempt to take over local administration in the Buner district, situated less than 100 km from the capital city of Islamabad, seemed to provide the appropriate *casus belli*. The Taliban had crossed a sort of invisible line marking an absolutely no-go area for them.

Military intervention, but at what price?

More than one month into the offensive, the uncompromising military approach seems to have produced the aimed results, at least according to official statements. On 31 May 2009, Pakistan’s defence secretary announced that the military operation in the Swat Valley region would only take a few additional days before reaching a successful completion. Despite words of caution from his military entourage, Syed Athar Ali continued by specifying that only “5% to 10% of the job” remained to be cleared out.² As the main city of the Swat district, Mingora, has been meanwhile formally retaken from the Taliban, the operation is expected to concentrate on the surrounding rural areas.

While the real military achievements of the campaign in the Malakand Division³ can not be easily assessed in an independent way, due to strong limitations on the access of media to those areas, the scale of destruction and loss inflicted on the local population by the military’s scorched earth policy appears to be considerable. At the end of May 2009, UN sources put the number of IDPs at an astonishing 2.4 million, leading to comparisons

¹ Pakistan disorder “global threat”, *BBC News*, 23 April 2009.

² ‘Pakistan “nearing Swat victory”’, *BBC News*, 31 May 2009.

³ The Division is part of the Northwest Frontier Province and consists of seven districts: Buner, Chitral, Lower Dir, Upper Dir, Malakand, Shangla and Swat. Since 1975, it has been administered as a Provincially Administered Tribal Area (PATA).

with the displacement produced by the Rwanda genocide 15 years earlier. The coming into action of the world's seventh largest armed force⁴ has revealed its dire limitations and dangerous fall-outs when having to deal with an elusive enemy, often deeply entrenched in the social texture of the theater of operation, rather than with a conventional rival army.

The enormous dislocation of people from Swat and the adjacent districts of Buner and Dir, confronts the Pakistani state with two major challenges: a humanitarian one and a security-related one. The humanitarian challenge is mainly represented by the sheer scale of the exodus and by the level of destruction of all sorts of basic infrastructures in the areas affected by the conflict. To that extent, Pakistan's international allies have been prompt to respond to that country's appeals to meet the humanitarian crisis with the necessary means. During a donors' conference that was held in Islamabad on 21 May 2009 they promised US\$ 224 million in aid.

Security implications of the humanitarian crisis

The security-related challenge is interlinked with the humanitarian one. As aptly expressed by Pakistan's Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani at the above mentioned conference, aid for the displaced would "help in ensuring that the militants don't exploit the vulnerability of the displaced population. We have to win the hearts and minds of the people," he said.⁵

The emergence of a humanitarian crisis of such huge proportions holds the potential of a series of threatening consequences to the stability of an already fragile country such as Pakistan:

1. The massive and greatly uncontrolled movement of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has the potential to act as a conduit for the spreading

of Taliban elements and ideology. Past massive military operations in the tribal areas, such as the 2008 operation in the Bajaur Agency, have been unmistakably characterized by a spreading of Taliban-style militancy to areas that until that moment had not been particularly known for its presence. The "informal" nature of Taliban-like groups, and their strong ethnic-tribal roots, make them often invisible to external actors, while at the same time very present within the communities where they have established themselves. It is for instance known that the leadership of the Pakistani Taliban consists mainly of men with menial daily occupations, with Maulana Fazlullah, the leader of the group based in the Swat Valley, being described alternatively as a chair-lift operator or a truck driver.

2. The protracted use of indiscriminate violence by the armed forces, in their effort "to eliminate the Taliban once and for all", may reignite ethnic tensions between the local Pashtun population and the Punjab-dominated army. If the current military operations continue indefinitely, there is a concrete risk that they could be perceived as part of a grand strategy of repression of the Pashtun by the Punjabi majority.
3. Another risk concerns the escalation of the conflict through the involvement of other (non-state) actors. As the offensive drags on and the efficacy of the armed forces in targeting the Taliban is likely to diminish, the government might be tempted to turn to local tribal militias, known as *lashkars*, in order to increase their level of penetration into the territory. Such a strategy, however, would further emphasize the incapacity of the state to deal with its own internal security problems, and at the same time it would risk creating and legitimizing new cycles of local violence that could easily escape its control.
4. Another potential threat originating from the current crisis is linked to the unavoidable tensions that arise once large (though temporary) resettlement flows take place, putting additional pressure on often already strained local natural resources, basic services, and on existing ethno-religious balances. The process of "Pashtunization" of the province of Baluchistan, which started with the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and continued with the subsequent rout of the Taliban at the end of 2001, is

⁴ As of 2006, the Pakistan armed forces consisted of approximately 620.000 active personnel, with an additional 300.000 paramilitary forces (Anthony H. Cordesman and Martin Kleiber, *The Asian Conventional Military Balance in 2006: Overview of major Asian Powers*, 26 June 2006, p.24, http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/o6o626_asia_balance_powers.pdf).

⁵ Robert Birsell, 'Pakistan's allies promise \$224 million for displaced', *The Washington Post*, 21 May 2009.

one case in point. Although quite murky and not supported by undisputable facts and figures, that process seems to have caused a growing shift in the province's ethnic balance between the Pashtun refugees and the indigenous Baluchi. In 2008 it was estimated that the Baluchi comprised some 40 to 60 percent of the province's population, while the Pashtun were believed to form between 28 and 50 percent. "Whatever the real figures, there is a tangible and growing intolerance among the Baluchi regarding the presence of Pashtun refugees from Afghanistan. Elements close to the Baluchi nationalist movement believe that the 'Talibanization' of the province has enjoyed the support of the state – especially of the military – as a way to weaken the Baluchi national democratic movement".⁶ Furthermore, the impact of the refugees' crisis will not only be felt around the overcrowded camps that have been set up just outside the conflict areas. It seems evident that only a minority of those displaced by the fighting has been accommodated in camps. Recent estimates put that figure at 15 to 20 per cent. The rest has been apparently spreading thinly across the country, with Punjab and Karachi as favourite destinations. Especially Karachi, with its history of ethnic riots, could prove to be ill equipped to sustain increased pressure on its resources and ethnic balance.

5. A final potential threat to the stability of the country concerns the fragility of the relationship keeping the population of the areas affected by the conflict and the government together. There is little doubt that the ongoing military operation clinching the Lower Dir, Buner and Swat districts has been mainly triggered by the heavy international pressure. It remains yet to be seen to which level of suffering and loss the people of these areas are prepared to bear in order to get rid of the presence of the Taliban.

⁶ Marco Mezzera and Safiya Aftab, *Pakistan State – Society Analysis*, Initiative for Peace-building, January 2009, p. 12 http://www.initiativeforpeacebuilding.eu/pdf/Pakistan_State_Society_Analysis.pdf.

⁷ Naveed .A. Shinwari, *Understanding FATA: Attitudes towards governance, religion & society in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas*. Peshawar, Pakistan: Community Appraisal & Motivation Programme (CAMP), 2008, p. 18.

Do not take loyalties for granted

With regard to this last point, it is almost impossible to determine the kind of support that the military operation enjoys among the local population. Pakistan's peculiar situation in terms of state-society relations and internal societal structures requires some elaborate reflection on the matter.

To begin with, most of those so-called Taliban are more intrinsic to the societies where they operate than the state's formal institutions. Especially in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), traditionally regarded as buffer zones amidst complex geo-strategic balances of power, the central state has been a consistently missing feature of the institutional landscape, with the only exception of irregular and painful military operations. Those areas have long enjoyed a semi-autonomous status, with the tribal leaders exercising virtually complete control of their own internal affairs. Given to such a setting, it is obvious that any state's initiative to regain administrative or military control of these agencies would need to be carefully planned and gradually implemented. An all out military offensive is probably the worst way of trying to bring back the state into these areas.

The ability and willingness of Taliban groups to challenge traditional and inequitable local power structures should also be taken into consideration. The aforementioned TNSM, for instance, has been reportedly exploiting class rifts in order to deepen its hold on its areas of operations. It has systematically targeted local landlords, and upon their flight, it has allowed local peasants access to the vacated land. Given to the specific history of peasant mobilization in the Malakand Division and the repressive role played by landlords in connivance with the state machinery, the potential appeal of the TNSM on the disenfranchised local population should not be underestimated. Similarly, their demands for the implementation of Sharia should be looked at against the backdrop of a corrupt and inefficient formal judicial system.

The situation of political and economic marginalization of the tribal areas has further determined the significant level of economic attraction exercised by the Taliban, especially upon the local youth. In the specific case of the FATA, according to the 1998 census, these "are the most economically backward areas of Pakistan and some 60 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line".⁷ In such an abysmal economic situation, which is

certainly true also for other parts of the NWFP, it is hardly surprising that the circulation of significant amounts of money originating from a whole series of illegal activities, can easily master widespread loyalties among the population. Again, the extensive destruction caused by the sort of military operations unleashed in the Swat Valley is definitely not the best means to promote economic development.

Finally, there is an issue of systemic distrust of the military amongst the majority of the Pakistani population when it comes to dealing with Islamic militancy. The armed forces' and especially the Inter-Services Intelligence's (ISI) key role in proping up the Taliban resistance to the Soviet army during the 10 years of the Afghanistan war, and their equally central role in supporting religious extremists involved in terrorist operations on the Indian-controlled side of Kashmir, have contributed to the widespread perception that the Taliban and the military are still connected by robust, though invisible, linkages. Conspiracy theories accompanying any terrorist attack on Pakistani soil are common, whereby the alleged interests of deviated sectors of the security forces are carefully analyzed and brought forward. More in general, the conjecture that a country characterized by 37 years of military rule, out of the 62 that have passed by since independence, may have some intrinsic interest in maintaining a certain (i.e. manageable) degree of instability, is widely regarded as acceptable.

In the specific case of the latest Swat offensive, fundamental questions remain as to the strategic approach chosen by the military to deal with the insurgency. Notwithstanding the usual justification that the Pakistani army has been essentially created to engage its archenemy India in a conventional war, it remains hard to believe that its intelligence operations, which have proved to be so effective on foreign territory, are so incredibly lacking when they need to address domestic problems. From the scant witnesses' accounts that emerged from the Swat Valley, the impression has indeed been raised that the army has decided to engage an elusive enemy by relying on the use of full-blown military force, rather than on counter-insurgency tactics.

Fundamental changes needed

In the light of above considerations it appears obvious that the key to Pakistan's future stability or instability lies with its handling of the current military offensive and of the resulting refugees' crisis. The Pakistani state has the opportunity to redeem itself from its ambiguous past by achieving a swift and decisive victory over the Taliban of the Swat Valley (and eventually also those of Waziristan), but above all by showing to its citizens that it can still fulfil its fundamental functions on their behalf. The state needs to make its presence felt among those suffering, not only through the powerful hand of the security forces, but mainly through effective relief and reconstruction efforts.

The international community, on its turn, should make use of the opportunity provided by the sheer scale of the dramatic events in order to trigger substantial reforms within the governance system that has held hostage the country for so many years. A paradigm shift in the way the country's elites justify their *raison d'être* is needed. To start with, the instrumental use of the so-called "existential threat" on the eastern borders of the country should be profoundly questioned, together with the exclusively military approach envisioned to deal with the other, more recent, existential threat represented by the Pakistani Taliban. But eventually, it is the overall system of formal and informal governance structures and processes, which has created structural inequalities within Pakistani society, that should be called into question.

The facets and causes of Pakistan's protracted crisis are multiple and should all be properly recognized and dealt with. The origin of such a redemptive process, however, should be based in a genuine attempt to turn Pakistan's formal democracy into a substantive democracy, whereby citizens are truly put in the position to decide the country's destiny regardless of all the patronage, elite, ethnic, tribal, military and religious powers that constantly try to harness the country's governance system.

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