

# Talibanisation of Pakistan

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**ALOK BANSAL**

Pakistan has been going through tumultuous times. There are many problems plaguing the country, which can broadly be grouped under four heads, viz. sectarianism, assertion of ethnic identity by various ethnic groups, economic crisis and Talibanisation. All four are linked, and all four have their genesis in the flawed ideology of Pakistan – Two Nation Theory. However, of all these problems, the growing influence of Taliban and consequent radicalisation of society pose the gravest threat to the future of Pakistan. Growing Talibanisation in Pakistan is nothing but a natural manifestation of the Two Nation Theory, which automatically made religion the central issue in the new state. It is widely believed that Taliban was created by Pakistani Home minister Nasrullah Babar in 1994, when Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Pakistan's chosen candidate to rule Afghanistan failed to capture Kabul. However, the seeds of Talibanisation were sown in 1947 itself, when the biggest threat to emerging Pakistani Nationalism came from Pakhtoon nationalism. To counter this Pakhtoon challenge, the establishment propagated fundamentalist Islam in the region to promote the concept of one Islamic Ummah. To further prevent the consolidation of Pakhtoon nationalism, FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Area) was not merged with NWFP (North West Frontier Province, now called Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and kept outside the pale of political and economic mainstream, frozen in its medieval milieu, which provided an ideal breeding ground for Taliban. To compound the problem the new state withdrew army from the region, which had hitherto been militarised heavily.

Saur Revolution in Afghanistan and the subsequent movement of Soviet Army into Afghanistan changed the landscape in FATA considerably. There was large scale migration of Afghan nationals to NWFP through South Waziristan in FATA.

These refugees were housed in camps, from where the resistance movement to the Soviet occupation originated and was proclaimed as *Jihad* by the Western media to win over sympathetic Muslim population.<sup>1</sup> Although the last Soviet troops left Afghanistan on February 15, 1989, Pakistan continued to fuel this *jihad* with weapons and equipment.<sup>2</sup> However, the ruling elite that assumed power in Kabul after replacing the communists was not sympathetic to Islamabad and as its attempts to install Gulbudin Hekmatyar, its nominee in Kabul failed, it introduced a new force – the Taliban.

The Taliban movement emerged from Pakhtoons of Afghanistan and NWFP, who were indoctrinated in Pakistani madaris (madrassas) and were armed and trained by the ISI.<sup>3</sup> With Pakistani support Taliban, which had been set up by the ISI for the purpose of installing a client government in Afghanistan, attained enormous successes against the war lords ensconced in Kabul.<sup>4</sup> By end 1996, the Taliban had captured Kabul and most of Afghanistan largely by paying off the tribal leaders with funds provided by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and in tribal societies, “tribesmen follow their leader rather than an abstract ideology.”<sup>5</sup>

In the aftermath of US attack on Afghanistan in October 2001, the Taliban and Al Qaeda elements which had previously been active in Afghanistan took shelter in the inaccessible and mountainous regions of FATA.<sup>6</sup> Pakistani forces largely avoided interfering with their movement into Pakistani territory with an ostensible aim of using them in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal. However, this policy had to change in 2002, when “Operation Anaconda” was launched in Afghanistan by the coalition forces led by the US, which forced Pakistani troops to enter South Waziristan Agency in FATA to prevent Taliban and Al Qaeda from infiltrating into the region. Pakistani intelligence agencies directed the local Taliban to surrender the foreign militants thereby creating a distinction between the two.<sup>7</sup> It was against the ideology of “one Islamic Ummah” transcending the state boundaries, being propagated by the radical outfits like Al Qaeda. Even before the troops moved into South Waziristan, they had been deployed in Kurram Agency in FATA, during the US attack on Tora Bora towards the end of 2001, to prevent the militants hiding in the caves of Tora Bora from crossing over.<sup>8</sup>

By June 2002, Pakistan Army had moved a division into Tirah Valley in Khyber Agency and Parachinar in Kurram Agency to prevent infiltration by Al Qaeda militants. By 2003 North and South Waziristan agencies had become the main battle ground for the Pakistani Army and the Islamic militants and over 80,000 army and paramilitary troops were deployed there.<sup>9</sup> However, instead of taking on the militant leadership, the troops only engaged the foot soldiers and that too

at only those places where their presence could not be hidden from the media glare. Even there the attempt was to engage only the foreign militants, while allowing the Taliban to melt into the local population.<sup>10</sup> According to a retired Brigadier of the Pakistan Army, the Taliban had the freedom to regroup in this remote tribal region, to launch attacks against the coalition forces in Afghanistan and return back to avoid reprisals.<sup>11</sup> However, this policy had to change under sustained US pressure and the Pakistani troops were forced to enter South Waziristan Agency in FATA and directed the local Taliban to surrender the foreign militants. The aim was to create a distinction between the local Taliban and Al Qaeda led foreign militants.<sup>12</sup> As this strategy failed, the Pakistan government tried different strategies to control the militants in the region and despite using disproportionately large force; the Army could not establish the writ of the state. It therefore sought peace deals with the militants in South Waziristan, initially with Nek Mohammed and subsequently with Baitullah Mehsud. However, each of these deals only helped Taliban to consolidate its position and spread its influence.

Despite failure of the peace deals in South Waziristan, the Pakistani government, subsequently, attempted the same policy of accommodation with the militants in North Waziristan. It accordingly signed another peace deal with the militants, with Maulana Fazlur Rehman's assistance, called Miramshah Agreement on September 5, 2006.<sup>13</sup> But like previous such attempts in South Waziristan it failed to usher in peace. By 2006, the violence had also spread to Bajaur and Mohmand agencies in FATA and the adjoining regions in NWFP and Baluchistan. During 2006, there were 144 terrorist attacks/clashes in FATA resulting in 379 people being killed, whilst there were 60 attacks in NWFP which left 139 persons dead and 303 wounded. The year 2007 saw a sharp geographical expansion of the areas affected by Islamic radicalism and militancy in NWFP. In the aftermath of Lal Masjid operations in Islamabad, *Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi* (TNSM) led by Maulana Fazalullah, which had allied with Taliban virtually took over the entire Swat Valley between October 25, 2007 and November 7, 2007. Despite the presence of over 3000 troops, the Taliban not only captured the region but also appointed its own administrators. A large number of troops and policemen surrendered and a large number were captured by the militants. All these personnel were released after being disarmed. Fazalullah, who had set up a chain of FM stations, continued his broadcast and Taliban eliminated any one who dared to oppose their writ in the region.

After taking over Swat Valley, the militants consolidated themselves in the settled districts of NWFP. In 2007, there were 435 attacks by the militants in FATA, resulting in 1663 people being killed and 2020 being injured. There were 460 attacks in NWFP resulting in 1096 deaths and injuries to 1593 people. There was also a rise in suicide bombings in the aftermath of operations in Lal Masjid, a number of security personnel and army establishments were targeted. During the year, there were 33 suicide bombings in NWFP, resulting in 374 dead and 640 injured and 11 suicide bombings in FATA, which resulted in 69 people being killed and 131 injured. There were also three suicide attacks in Quetta, a city with substantial Pakhtoon population, which resulted in loss of 22 lives and injuries to 57 people.<sup>14</sup>

The phenomenon of Pakistani Taliban that appeared first in South Waziristan in 2002 had engulfed the entire FATA and spread to most of the settled areas in NWFP by 2007. So much so that the two major political parties the ANP and the Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Islam-Fazal (JUI-F) agreed that the situation in the province was grave. In fact, the JUI-F leader Fazlur Rehman, who has had close links with most of the militants operating in the region and was instrumental in brokering deals with militants in the past and controls most of the madaris in Waziristan,<sup>15</sup> in a meeting of ruling coalition partners went to the extent of saying that the province was on the verge of breaking away from Pakistan and the ANP conceded that the Taliban had extended their influence to most part of the province including the regions surrounding the provincial capital, Peshawar.<sup>16</sup>

In the run up to February 2008 elections, the caretaker provincial government of NWFP, in a desperate bid to buy peace, proposed implementation of Shariat regulations in the entire Malakand Division comprising of seven districts, Dir Upper, Dir Lower, Swat, Shangla, Buner, Malakand and Chitral in NWFP. The proposal intended to take away from people, their right to submit a writ in the High Court and the Supreme Court, instead a Shariat court at the division level was to be set up as the final arbiter of justice.<sup>17</sup> However, the opposition from lawyers and sections of judiciary prevented the law from coming into force. Meanwhile the elections in 2008 brought an ANP led government to power in NWFP and as it found itself besieged by all-round violence, it again sued for peace. It signed peace deals with both Fazlullah's father in law - Sufi Mohammad, the founder of TNSM and Fazlullah.

The deals were so demoralising for the security forces that four hundred policemen reportedly resigned from the force.<sup>18</sup> Subsequently, the deal was unilaterally discarded by TNSM under directives from TTP chief, Baitullah

Mehsud who was unhappy with the ongoing military operations in Waziristan.<sup>19</sup> As a result, Swat was a fierce battleground by the end of 2008 and by January 2009, the militants were controlling most of Swat valley. In 2008 there were 1009 terrorist attacks in NWFP, including 32 suicide attacks, which led to 982 deaths and injuries to 1735 people. In contrast, in FATA where Taliban had already established their '*Emirates*' in many agencies, there were only 385 terrorist attacks in FATA, in which 619 people were killed and 892 injured.<sup>20</sup>

ANP government, which came to power in NWFP after the 2008 elections, realised that the Pakistan army was disinclined to fight the Taliban, leaving the ill-equipped Frontier Corps (FC) to battle them. The civilian administration had already become defunct in the areas under Taliban influence with almost 60 percent of police personnel missing due to large-scale desertions. The Army had restricted itself to occasionally clearing the roads and then "taking distant artillery shots at the Taliban, and occasionally sending in helicopter gunships," while remaining confined to its bunkers.<sup>21</sup> It expected the FC to hold the cleared areas, who were being targeted by Taliban suicide bombers forcing them to cower behind piles of sandbags. As the FC men hail from the same region, their families were publicly decapitated by the Taliban, resulting in frequent advertisements appearing in the local newspapers proclaiming that so and so is resigning his job and taking up a new vocation of serving god.<sup>22</sup> The realisation that the state and security establishment of Pakistan was failing to provide security to ANP cadres which were being targeted by Taliban regularly, forced the provincial government to sue for peace.<sup>23</sup> It accordingly signed a fresh peace deal with Sufi Mohammad on February 16, 2009, which was followed with another peace deal with Fazlullah in 2009.

The deal implemented Shariat laws in over half the territory of NWFP and was passed by the Pakistani parliament without a debate. However, none of these deals brought lasting peace to the region, they only helped the Taliban to spread its influence, reorganise, rearm, retrain and challenge the writ of the state. These deals contributed immensely towards the creation of Islamic 'Emiret' of Waziristan in South and North Waziristan agencies.

In an extremely feudal hierarchical tribal society like the one that exists, in these parts of Pakistan, the mere willingness of the government to negotiate, enhances the stature of the leader of the militant group to the level of the authority negotiating with them. More over Taliban always utilised such tactical interregnums to eliminate the 'agents of the security forces' and other 'collaborators'. Consequently, after each such deal the Taliban has emerged

stronger and continued accommodation with Taliban has ensured that the movement spread from South Waziristan to North Waziristan and then to entire FATA. From FATA, this menace has spread to NWFP, North Baluchistan, Punjab and urban Sind. It has piggy backed on various sectarian outfits to spread its influence in Punjab and urban Sind. It has also taken up the cause of economically down trodden against the Shia land lords in Southern Punjab. Under pressure from the US, the operation Rah-e-Rast was launched to clear the Taliban from Swat and Rah-e-Nijat to clear them from South Waziristan. Consequently the violence in 2009 increased considerably.

In 2009, across Pakistan a total of 2586 attacks were launched by the militants that led to killing of 3021 and injuries to 7334.<sup>24</sup> There were 1137 terrorist attacks in NWFP including 52 suicide attacks, which claimed 1,438 lives including 1,005 civilians, 87 Frontier Constabulary (FC), 200 police, 143 army and five levies personnel, while 3,616 people were injured in total, including 2,777 civilians, 251 FC, 366 police, four paramilitary, 200 army and seven levies personnel. In FATA, 559 terrorist attacks, including seven suicide attacks, were reported that killed 644 people including 390 civilians, 63 FC, 57 paramilitary, 116 army and eight levies personnel. As many as 1,046 people were injured in these attacks, including 560 civilians, 151 FC, 59 paramilitary, 257 army and five levies personnel.<sup>25</sup> The operations did succeed in sizing the territory from Taliban control, but the spread of Talibanisation across Pakistani society continues unabated. Accordingly in 2010, the over all violence reduced in Pakistan reduced by 11 per cent, but the influence of Taliban spread to newer areas, as a result, although the violence decreased in KPK (earlier NWFP) and FATA, it increased in Sind and Punjab. The government continued to rely to a military solution to growing Talibanisation. However, the its failure to rectify the growing influence of the militants in Karachi and the deepening of sectarian and ethno-political fault lines there, have aggravated the problems. This coupled with the radicalisation of a largely young and poor population in South Punjab have facilitated the spread of Taliban ideology.<sup>26</sup>

The assassination of Salman Taseer and the glaring silence of the establishment has shattered the myth of liberal majority in Pakistan. Talibanisation has permeated across social and ethnic barriers to engulf the entire Pakistani society including the Armed Forces. There have been numerous instances, where members of the armed forces have collaborated with the Taliban. Many officers preferred to be court-martialled than to fight the Taliban in FATA. There have been instances, where aircraft and tanks likely to be deployed against Taliban have

been made inoperative by sabotage. The attack on PNS Mehran like almost every other attack on defence establishment bore clear signs of insider collusion and possible participation. Journalist, Saleem Shehzad was tortured and eliminated for openly stating that a number of Al Qaeda and Taliban sympathisers were present within the Pakistani Armed Forces. The arrest of Brigadier Ali Khan of Pakistani Army, who was posted at the General Headquarters (GHQ ) for links with pan-Islamic radical outfit Hizb-ut-Tehrir in May 2011, has highlighted the existence of radical Islamist elements within Pakistan's Armed Forces. The fact that Brigadier Khan is a third generation army officer, with a brother, son and son-in-law in the Army; indicates the penetration levels of Taliban within the Pakistani security establishment.<sup>27</sup>

For the first time since Pakistan's creation, there is a threat to the cohesion of the Pakistan Army. This in Pakistan's case could be catastrophic as Pakistani Army is believed to be the only functioning institution in the country. According to Stephen Cohen, most States have an army but in Pakistan's case the army has a State. The erosion of the Pakistan army could lead to 'Lebanonisation of Pakistan' and that could be catastrophic for India. There have already been cases of firings across international borders which could not be attributed to state agencies. It is therefore essential that India should be prepared for more such cases. As Taliban transforms into Pakistan's Hezbollah, India must decide its response to firings across international borders by non-state actors.

Growing Talibanisation, if unchecked would eventually lead to emergence of Pakistan as a citadel of radical Islam, with liberal elements either pushed out or silenced. Such a state would start exporting its ideology across the world. Already almost all the Islamic militants from across the world- from Philippines to Chechnya, including Indonesians, Maldivians, Bangladeshi, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Arabs and Uyghur's come to Pakistan for indoctrination. This would cause a conflict that would transcend regional boundaries. The possession of nuclear weapons by such a state would further aggravate the situation and pose the most serious challenge to Global Peace.

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Alok Bansal is a Senior Fellow at CLAWS.

## Notes

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