



Pakistan: Reality's Collision with Hope

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Abstract

After expressing the judgment that Pakistan is in a revolutionary or at least a prerevolutionary state, a scholar/former journalist analyzes the sorry state of affairs that prevails in Pakistan today. Pakistan, he contends, is as feudal and medieval as it is modern. In effect, its attempts to straddle the fourteenth and twenty-first centuries have produced a country riddled with violence and mired in contradictions.

As has often been the case in American foreign policy, the United States is again focusing too much on personality and taking too little account of some rather unpleasant facts on the ground. Nowhere has this been more telling than in Pakistan, especially with President Pervez Musharraf. The “president general” is probably not the solution and notwithstanding liberal assumptions, he is not really the problem. Pakistan is the problem.

The wild swings in American perceptions over the past year, such as “Musharraf is our devoted ally in the war on terror”; “Musharraf is a liberal dictator”; “Musharraf is an illiberal tyrant”; “Pakistan’s leader is turning a blind eye to Islamist extremists”; “Musharraf is in Al Qaida’s crosshairs” only confirm this. All of these statements have been versions of truth at one time or another, but because they are contradictory, such conclusions have largely been considered immaterial.

The surge in violence in 2008 grafted onto an already violent and crime-ridden country strongly suggests that Pakistan is in a revolutionary or at least prerevolutionary state. Of

Pakistan’s four provinces, the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) are semi-autonomous or at least barely in the control of the Islamabad government.

Losing Control

Over the last year, when such members of the U.S. Congress as Senator Joseph Biden periodically clamored for Musharraf to crack down on the “terrorists,” they were apparently unaware that on several occasions when Islamabad tried to do just that, the indigenous tribes, with considerable sympathy and support from Al Qaeda and the resurgent Taliban, badly whipped the Pakistani Army. A more recent revolt in Swat was put down by the army, but Maulana Fazlullah and other radical Islamist leaders believed aligned with Al Qaeda eluded the army and escaped.

A trip to Peshawar and over the legendary Khyber Pass is instructive. As a journalist I crossed the pass, the main link between the NWFP and Afghanistan, half a dozen or more times in 2001 and 2002. It is straight out of Kipling and Harry Flashman. Leaving Peshawar, everyone was warned, “Don’t travel that road at night.” Along the way are mud frontier army posts that look strangely like the Alamo. In 2001 the threats came from gun runners, drug smugglers, kidnappers, and rogues. Today the NWFP and FATA are the preserve of the Islamist extremists and their reign of terror—the springboard for launching suicide bombings and assassinations across the

other three Pakistani provinces all the way over to the Indian border.

Talking to *The Washington Post* late last year, President Musharraf speculated that Osama bin Laden might be hiding in the Bajaur Tribal Agency (district) along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan. Prior to the elections in February, NWFP residents complained that "There is no government in many parts of the region." Neither were there food items or much fuel. Lawlessness created more refugees.

The trips across the Khyber, which I made four or five years ago, would likely be suicidal now. Pakistani soldiers caught out alone are found beheaded. It is not uncommon for locals in that corner of Pakistan to be found dead with notes around their necks reading "This is what happens to American spies." Usually these local killings are less about espionage than score settling. Somebody wanted the dead man's wife or land.

The NWFP and FATA, which are off limits for Americans these days, are nearly as risky for Pakistanis. A businessman I met in December 2007 told of a colleague who was making an overland trip to Kabul across the Khyber Pass. His Pakistani friend hired a cab at the border east of Torkham and asked to be driven to Kabul. When he arrived, the Afghan cab driver told his Pakistani passenger, "This is your lucky day!" "Why?" asked the Pakistani businessman. The driver replied, "This taxi is filled with explosives. I planned to ram any cars with Westerners or NGOs we met. But we just never found anyone to blow up."

Peshawar, the provincial capital of the NWFP, experienced close to 40 bombings in 2007. Most of the targets were CD and video shops, Internet cafés, and girls' schools. Virtually no one was arrested, tried, or convicted. The North-West Frontier Province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas are not all there is to Pakistan, but it merits asking, If a government cannot govern its country, what claim to a future does it have?

The following drives home the implications of the question. In February 2007 a World Health Organization (WHO) polio vaccination campaign, approved by Islamabad, was halted by one man, Maulana Fazlullah, a radical Islamist clergyman in the NWFP district of Swat. Fazlullah preached that "finding a cure for an epidemic before its outbreak is not allowed in sharia [because], according to sharia, one should avoid going to the areas where an epidemic has broken out but those who go to such areas and get killed during an outbreak are martyrs." The basis for his preaching against polio vaccinations is the belief that they are a diabolical American plot to render Muslim children impotent. The government was forced to postpone its inoculations indefinitely.

Drowning in Contradictions

Driving back from the North-West Frontier Province, crossing the Indus River, birthplace of so many cultures, one feels one is returning to the twenty-first century the closer one gets to Islamabad. But civilization is a relative term in Pakistan. The country always seems to be drowning in its own contradictions.

Nuclear weapons and Western-educated elite aside, Pakistan is at least as medieval and feudal as it is modern. Culturally it is attempting to straddle the fourteenth and twenty-first centuries. The land ownership system is acknowledged to be feudal. Beyond large cities such as Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, and Rawalpindi, it is not difficult to imagine oneself in pre-Capetian France.

The medieval analogy is not facetious. Pakistan is the only country I know where 1.5 million eunuchs petitioned the government for political representation on the eve of the last elections. They were turned down. When I inquired about this anachronistic custom from the courts of the Mughul Empire, there seemed

a reluctance to discuss the practice. But persevering, I was told that poor families with a surfeit of children sell a surplus son to a eunuch master for perhaps \$500. After the alteration, the youngster is then sold or leased to upper middle-class families as a houseboy. He is particularly marketable to an older man with a younger wife and daughters.

Feudalism in Pakistan today is well documented. It generally refers to patterns of land ownership, inheritance, serfdom, and political affiliations. The feudal landlords are deeply entrenched in the political system, including the parliament. The late Benazir Bhutto came from one of the great feudal families of Sindh Province. The feudal lords, often in league with the army, the clergy, and the captains of Pakistani industry, have resisted every effort at reform. They still pay no tax on agricultural income.

The “feudals,” as they are referred to in Pakistan, run their holdings not unlike the way King John ran Plantagenet England. The serfs belong to the land and are bound to the land and the feudal lord. The exploitation of humankind under this system is pretty egregious. Justice is meted out in Pakistan’s feudal agricultural disputes in ways that would make a thirteenth-century Norman shire reeve look liberal.

Consider the case of Rayman Santhar. In 2007 he took 10 buffalo on loan from Imad Shikarpur in Sindh Province. For some unknown reason Santhar defaulted on the loan of the buffalo, worth approximately 170,000 Pakistani rupees, about \$2,833 dollars. Unable to repay the debt, the buffalo borrower offered his two underage daughters, who were accepted as payment.

Article 37 of the Pakistani constitution states, “The state shall protect the marriage, the family, mother and child, . . .” but seems more honored in the breach than the observance. Article 11 states “...slavery and all forms of trafficking in human beings are prohibited, . . .” but the Society for [the]

Protection of [the] Rights of Children reported an increase in trafficking of “underage girls” in that country.

Young women who were my students in Karachi told me of feudal landlords in Sindh taking a shine to a lesser man’s betrothed or one of the daughters of their tenant farmers and simply kidnapping the women for their own carnal pleasures. England’s King John did the same in the thirteenth century. My students told me that some of the confiscated females were housed in animal sheds and pens until discarded. Rapes reportedly occur in Pakistan at a rate of every two hours; yet convictions for rape are virtually unheard of.

Pakistan is yet another of those countries that were cobbled together after the collapse of the British Empire. It is a group of provinces, a federation with 200 different tribes commanding individual loyalties rather than having an identifiable national loyalty. Allegiance is to the family, the caste, the tribe, the village, and then only to the nation—a state of affairs that may help to explain why the radical Islamists can operate so freely. Upward of 20 different languages are spoken in the country.

Even before the December 27, 2007, assassination of Benazir Bhutto, levels of discouragement ran high among young Pakistanis. Working with two dozen educated young professionals there, I began to quiz them about what they thought their country would look like 50 years hence. More than a few said they thought it would fall apart, *Balkanize* being the word they used. The late Ms. Bhutto expressed a similar foreboding. She used the term “Balkanization” to describe forces at work in her country just before she was assassinated. She did not live long enough to have to deal with it, but after the honeymoon of the new coalition government, that specter could return if the violence spins out of control.

This scenario is not unfamiliar in Pakistan: Baluchistan, which has hosted a low threshold rebellion since it was forced into Pakistan in 1947, decides to break away; the North-West

Frontier Province and the tribal agencies forge a link with fellow Pashtun tribesman in Afghanistan; the Punjab, home to most of Pakistan's military leaders, becomes its own independent nuclear armed state; and Sindh Province, culturally most similar to India, re-affiliates with India. Far-fetched as all this sounds, I have on more than one occasion heard Western-educated Pakistanis from Sindh openly lament their grandfathers' break with India in 1947.

Young Pakistanis, especially in Sindh, envy India's greater social freedom and stand in awe of India's technological revolution. A common lament heard among 20-year-old Pakistanis who live closer to India than to Afghanistan is "They (Indians) are 75 years ahead of us and we will never catch up." Except for businessmen making money, hope is another commodity in short supply in Pakistan. The serpent of "creeping Talibanization" haunts thoughts of the future.

Education levels across this country of 165 million are pretty poor. Pakistan spends less on education than most of its neighbors, and that includes not just India but Bangladesh, Iran, and Nepal. A recent UNESCO report measuring universal primary education, gender parity, and adult literacy puts Pakistan among the 10 worst, alongside Eritrea, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Benin, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad. War-torn Afghanistan has a better report card. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency reports a 49.5 percent literacy rate in Pakistan, but that is misleading. Pakistani friends tell me their government's benchmark for literacy is the ability to sign one's name. More pessimistic estimates suggest the real illiteracy rate may be as high as 80 to 90 percent.

Pakistani officials are notorious when it comes to fudging statistics and facts. Last year the European Union forbade all but seven planes in the Pakistan International Airline fleet from landing at European airports. Pakistanis were told officially it was because the other 33 airplanes did not meet noise

abatement requirements for EU cities. The issue for the EU, however, was safety and maintenance of the aircraft. The only planes considered airworthy were seven spanking-new Boeing 777s.

Culture of Violence

Violence has become as much a part of Pakistani culture as hotly seasoned biryani, a traditional rice and chicken dish. Even kite flying is violent in Pakistan. It is outlawed in all four provinces except in the environs of Lahore during Basant, the annual rites of spring festival—a local equivalent of Mardi Gras. Contestants affix razor blades and sharp edges to kites to slice through the string of a competitor's kite. The aim is to send the other guy's kite reeling back to Earth. In the age of high technology, local kite twine manufacturers weave fiber glass or a Kevlar substitute into twine, guaranteeing kites can only be brought down by Stinger missiles left over from the Soviet war in Afghanistan.

Khaled Hosseini's popular novel *The Kite Runner* gives too rosy a view of this spring pastime. This is an aggressive and dangerous sport. Carelessly discarded Kevlar-based twine falls across roads and thoroughfares, garroting and dismembering people passing on motorbikes. During every Basant, Lahore television shows grizzly pictures of a child who was a passenger on a motorbike with a deeply gashed neck from errant kite twine. A five-year-old boy riding on his father's scooter was decapitated last spring in Lahore. In the interest of public safety the provincial government in Punjab gives away free twine-deflecting rods for motorbikes that look like fiberglass radio aerials. The flexible plastic rods are bent to form a loop, front to back over motorbikes, allowing lethal kite twine to pass over the heads of those on board the bikes. (This year, the Basant festival, which was supposed to take

place in March, was canceled altogether because of the threat of bombings by Islamists.)

Private security firms may well be Pakistan's biggest growth industry. Millions are spent on buying protection for homes and businesses because police are notoriously corrupt. A Western businessman riding in Karachi usually has a uniformed armed guard in the car with him. Routes to and from work are prudently changed every day or so to avoid kidnappings and robbery.

Brazen thieves on motorbikes or on foot are ever a threat. The first thing one is told in Karachi is "Never talk on your cell phone while in the car because it makes you a quick mark for robbery at gunpoint." Karachi has huge markets for fenced cell phones, and nearly everyone I worked with told me they had been robbed of one. The local papers reported 4,200 cell phones stolen in Karachi in the first two months of 2007.

Murders are routine. Crime comes not in waves in Pakistan but in tsunamis. Public frustration is evidenced in newspaper headlines like this one in April 2007: "Death Penalty Not Satisfying Enough."

Outside Southwest Asia this culture of violence is familiar only on the political level. One former prime minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was executed. Another chief of state, General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, was assassinated, blown up on an airplane with the U.S. ambassador in 1988. Other prime ministers have been exiled or barred from politics, usually by the army. More recently a leading liberal candidate for leadership, Benazir Bhutto, was killed after a campaign rally.

The world went into catatonic shock at Benazir's death, believing the last hope for liberal reform in Pakistan died with her. But equally gruesome murders are frequent and usually below the radar of international news reporting. The Punjab minister for social welfare, Zille Huma Usman, was brutally murdered in February 2007 on her way to an open court. This mother of two young boys

was slain because her male assailant claimed she was not observing the Muslim code of dress. Her assassin had previously been charged with murdering four young female models. In the previous murders, he was acquitted for "lack of evidence."

This plague of violence is at its worst when it targets the weak, the poor, and especially women, whose deaths do not merit more than a one-time mention in newspapers not much read outside of Pakistan (or in it, for that matter, given the low literacy rates). Every society has its contradictions and hypocrisies, but nowhere in Pakistan is the gap as great as between the Koranic esteem in which women are supposed to be held and their actual lot in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

The local name for honor killing is *karo-kari*. It is a common means of disposing of a man's "problem females." It takes hideous forms, from disfiguring a woman by throwing acid in her face because she has allegedly brought dishonor to the family, to outright murder. In between those extremes, women are stoned, paraded naked through the streets to shame them, or raped, often to punish someone else. Rapists know that the police can invariably be bought off.

Here are a few headlines in the last year from Karachi and Lahore newspapers: "13 WOMEN FELL PREY TO KARO-KARI LAST MONTH" (in Sindh Province alone), "WOMAN AXED BY BROTHER'S RIVALS," "THREE MARRIED WOMEN RAPED IN VILLAGE," "MAN TORTURES WIFE FOR NOT DOING PROSTITUTION," "GIRL (9 YRS. OLD) FORCED TO MARRY 35 YEAR OLD COUSIN TO SETTLE GAMBLING DEBT."

The most egregious case, one that received national notice, involved a 13-year-old girl who was gang-raped and forcibly paraded naked through the village of Ubaro in Sindh. It was an act of revenge perpetrated on her by half-a-dozen men, angry because the victim's cousin eloped with a woman related to one of the rapists. At the time I asked a senior news

editor at a Pakistan TV channel if the rapists would be brought to trial. With some embarrassment he dropped his head and mumbled, "I doubt it."

A recent published survey taken in Lahore inquiring about violence against women carried the headline, "71% MALES JUSTIFY BEATING WOMEN: SURVEY." The poll, conducted by the Punjab University Law College, showed that 71 percent of Pakistani males consider slapping or beating women justified. The survey found 80 percent of women face violence of one form or another in society. When one pushes these issues, noting that in theory Islam requires that equal rights be afforded to women, Pakistanis generally respond with some embarrassment saying, "We tend to be Muslims more in form than in substance."

Intolerance is another ugly cancer eating at the vitals of Pakistani society. Non-Sunnis, like the Ahmadi sect of Islam, face cruel discrimination and are not allowed to call themselves Muslims. Roman Catholics and other Christians live in constant fear of being accused of blasphemy. If a Muslim accuses a Catholic of not acknowledging the primacy of the prophet and Islam and not repeating the mantra "Peace be upon him" after mention of Muhammad's name, even in routine conversations, the accused can be hauled into jail. A Roman Catholic friend in Lahore said it is not uncommon for an angry Muslim neighbor to visit a local police station and level a charge of blasphemy in order to have one arrested.

My friend told me telephone death threats to Roman Catholics are not uncommon and Christian parents are terrorized by anonymous telephone calls threatening to kidnap their children. Outside urban centers, in villages, I was told that Christian girls are often singled out for rape because they are of less worth and not as pure as Muslim children. Against this unpunished intolerance, black robed attorneys complaining about their constitutional rights have a hollow and hypocritical ring.

Facing Reality

The purpose of this article is not to indict Pakistanis, whom I like very much on an individual level. But waxing cross-cultural, the Gospel parable of the sower and the seeds very much describes this corner of the subcontinent. Recall that some seed fell by the wayside, and some fell among thorns, but some fell into good ground. In this Islamic context most just seem to fall on stony ground.

The chasm between Western assumptions and reality as I am describing it in Pakistan stems in part from Washington's on-again-off-again relationship with Islamabad during and after the cold war. More important, our illusions about Pakistan flow from an arrogant assumption about what we want the country to be rather than from any consideration of what it actually is. We continue to ignore those ugly facts on the ground because we prefer not to notice them.

When Americans read of "elections" in Pakistan or of lawyers battling President Musharraf's police in the streets, they view concepts like the law, justice, and attorneys through the prism of their Western experience and ignore a rather obvious conundrum: "Why does Pakistan's legal establishment view Musharraf as a greater threat to their country than the Islamist extremists who have blown up courtrooms, seized government property, and kidnapped or assassinated those with whom they disagree?" On balance, during most of his tenure Musharraf brought a substantial degree of tranquility and prosperity prior to the advent of creeping Talibanization.

Musharraf did himself no favors sacking the Supreme Court last year. But on balance, declaring martial law, even with its illegal arrests and secret prisons, seems considerably less monstrous than the Islamists' violent bombings and beheadings that are becoming daily occurrences. The lawyers seemed to

prefer to vilify Musharraf, the lesser of the two threats, perhaps because it is safer to attack him. He might have them placed under house arrest, but Islamist extremists are likelier to murder a lawyer who got in their way.

Even Musharraf acted as if he were cowed by the female Islamic extremists at times. That appears to be one of the reasons the ramrod Musharraf hesitated for months to act against the burqa-clad women who, in February 2007, took over a government-owned children's library adjacent to the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad. The Jamia Hafsa Madrassa incident made the government look rather impotent against a gaggle of women carrying cane sticks and Kalashnikovs. For half a year the young women, inspired by the hard-line brothers Maulana Abdul Aziz and Abdul Rashid, held Musharraf's government hostage, dictating policy. The Islamabad government feared that if it moved against the young women, the Islamist bombings would get worse, a foreboding that seems to have been Musharraf's prime motivation or lack thereof in the course of the last year.

The army is the glue that seems to hold Pakistan together, and it is difficult to overstate its role within the republic. It is a hidden government, a sacred cow, and societal savior all wrapped up in one. Asif Ali Zardari, Benazir's widower and the new cohead of the Pakistan Peoples party, laid down the precondition for constitutional reform when he declared, "The whole structure of power must change in this country. The military must get out of politics." Yet Zardari is nothing if not a realist. Shortly after pronouncing that the Pakistani Army must get out of politics, Zardari also reportedly said that he did not rule out a role for the army chief of staff in a future coalition government. Again, the society is drowning in its contradictions.

In the weeks following the February 18, 2008, parliamentary elections, American and British writers flocked to Pakistan, interviewing Musharraf and Zardari and hailing the

new reasons for renewed hope in that country. But these self-appointed silk-stocking emissaries of optimism travel about the country with armed guards protecting them. What does that tell you about Pakistan? They point to gains by secular candidates over religious extremist parties in recent elections. But when did people who plant bombs respect the results of democratic elections? It did not happen in the villages of South Vietnam, and it is most unlikely to happen in the tribal societies of Pakistan. The leaders of Al Qaeda have nowhere else to go, and their dreams of a new caliphate are not going to be affected by poll findings.

If Pakistanis were genuinely interested in cleaning up the Islamist extremists in the NWFP and FATA, which the U.S. director of national intelligence, Vice-Admiral John M. "Mike" McConnell, believes threatens Pakistan, Islamabad might seek assistance from the American military, which would be all too eager to enter the border preserves of Al Qaeda. The truth, however, is that many in Pakistan outside of Islamabad's bureaucracy still see the United States as more sinister and threatening than Osama bin Laden. Indeed, Pakistan's new coalition government has already signaled it prefers an accommodation with the Islamist extremists rather than confrontation. Again, most Pakistanis see Islamist militancy as the lesser of two evils, Washington being the greater.

The United States is perceived by the general public as a hypocritical bully that supports Israel and wars against Muslims. From their neighborhoods they see Washington threatening the Islamic Republic of Iran with which Pakistan shares a border. They are keenly sensitive to Muslims dying in Iraq and Afghanistan, and they consistently blame that on what they see as American imperial ambitions. In early March 2008, the Punjab University campus was swept by a rumor, deemed credible by many of the students, that Pakistan was about to be invaded by the U.S. military.

Against a backdrop of Iraq, Afghanistan, and American threats toward Iran, the possibility did not seem all that preposterous to the Muslim undergraduates.

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks against the United States, when the rest of the world commiserated with Americans, I was in Islamabad and recall Pakistani newspapers oozing bile and heaping hatred on the United States. American visitors, especially VIPs, may be welcomed graciously in Pakistan, but it is hard to be sanguine about a country warped by its anti-American hatred. During the funeral of Benazir Bhutto, angry Pakistanis were raging and shouting virulent anti-American slogans, despite the fact she was clearly Washington's favorite for prime minister. When Benazir died, the Pakistani street blamed the Americans rather than Al Qaeda. Amid this poisonous hatred of the United States, which financially props up both Pakistan's army and its economy, it is difficult for a rational

person to find all that much hope. Pakistan remains its own worst enemy.

About the Author

Walter C. Rodgers is distinguished scholar in residence at the Nelson Institute for International and Public Affairs at James Madison University. During his career as a journalist, he covered everything from the assassination of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. to the invasion of Iraq. His foreign postings have included tours as ABC News bureau chief in Moscow and CNN bureau chief in Jerusalem. In addition to his work in broadcast journalism, Rodgers has written extensively for the Associated Press, *The Washington Post*, *Washingtonian* magazine, and *The Christian Science Monitor*. He spent most of 2007 teaching journalists in Pakistan. Mr. Rodgers is also the author of *Sleeping with Custer and the 7th Cavalry: An Embedded Reporter in Iraq*.