

Unrest in Pakistan: Moving Beyond “the U.S. National Interest”

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“The military is the muscle that protects the ruling elite from the wrath of the people,” says Pakistani political analyst Dr. Mubashir Hassan. “Right now, people are out on the street; blocking roads, attacking railway stations, etc. If you read the papers, it seems as though a general uprising has started all over Pakistan.”

Dr. Hassan says that sporadic outbursts of anger in Pakistan won’t coalesce into a people’s revolution anytime soon. The demonstrators are too disorganized. But, the sheer volume of daily protests shows that many sectors of Pakistani society have pressing needs and priorities that do not include enlistment as foot soldiers in a proxy force for the United States’ War on Terror.

Dr. Hassan, a co-founder of the People’s Party of Pakistan, is a respected scholar and statesman. Last year, when we met with him, he had just returned from a visit, in the U.S., with Professors Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn, his contemporaries in seeking to build just and fair social structures. Last month, in Lahore, he spoke with us about U.S. interference in the region and changing dynamics in Pakistan.

A snapshot of unrest in Pakistan offers a framework for outsiders to understand why it is unfair to insist that Pakistan “do more” to fulfill the United States’ vision for fighting extremism. It may also suggest why strong anti-American sentiments prevail, in Pakistan, among the peasantry, the middle class, religious and secular groups, and the highly educated and privileged classes.

Throughout the past several months, demonstrators burned tires nearly every day in the streets of Karachi, Rawalpindi, Lahore and other population centers as they voiced their opposition to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and its insistence on the implementation of a Value Added Tax (VAT) along with a proposed 11.3 billion dollar bailout package. In a special meeting convened by the Farmers Association of Pakistan, (FAP), participants said that the VAT would “totally kill the farmers and cause irreparable damage to the agriculture sector by making inputs more expensive. This would, in turn, increase the prices of agriculture produce, adding to the miseries of both the farmer and consumer, who are already facing extreme economic depression.”

Ashraf Javed, writing for The Nation, reported that economic experts estimated that the IMF and the Pakistani government’s original plan for the VAT would increase the prices of over 122 major categories of items, including food, by at least 15 percent.

These proposed policies led to protests by the All Pakistan Organization of Small Traders and Cottage Industries, the Pakistan Muslim League, Jamaat-e-Islami, textile workers, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, and even spawned a nationwide mobile phone boycott. Because of the immense pressure put on the government to reject the VAT, Pakistan decided to postpone implementation of the tax from July to October. The government, under the leadership of the People's Party of Pakistan, has also come up with plans to incorporate many of the IMF's demands for the VAT into the General Sales Tax (GST), which already sits at about 16 percent. In response, the IMF has threatened to freeze future disbursements coming to Pakistan if the VAT is not implemented by July 1st along with a "power tariff," or 6 percent increase in electricity rates.

As the IMF and World Bank are insisting on a 6 percent hike in electricity rates, there has been nationwide upheaval over increased "load shedding," the term for scheduled power outages in Pakistan, which sometimes last for 10-12 hours per day. Protests against the power cuts, often quite militant, have consistently erupted in major cities like Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad. Demonstrators in other provinces and cities including Hyderabad, Multan, Quetta, Bahawalnagar, Sukkur, Badin, Mirpur Khas, Larkana, Thatta and Ghotki, Dera Ismail Khan, Hangu, Kurk, Swat and Muzaffarabad have also registered their outrage. Textile mills, manufacturers, the agricultural sector and traders are among the hardest hit by load shedding which limits the hours of operation, disrupting production and interfering with worker schedules. Protesters have created roadblocks, burned tires, gone on strike and organized massive sit-ins.

In Punjab, Pakistan's most densely populated province, the Tenants Association of Punjab, (AMP), demands "Ownership or Death." Involving 1 million landless tenants, based in villages stretching over 15 districts, AMP is one of Pakistan's largest political movements. For ten years, the AMP has struggled to secure ownership rights for poor families that have tilled their land for over four generations.

The military is one of the largest landholders in Pakistan, and military agencies such as the Remount Veterinary and Farms Corps (RVFC), Military Seed Corporation, Livestock Agricultural Department and Dairy Farm, and the Seed Research Farm have been claiming ownership and collecting revenue from tenants. The Punjab Board of Revenue has ruled that these military companies have no legal claim to the land or its revenue, but tenants have faced campaigns of intimidation, coercion, cruelty and murder by armed police and paramilitary forces.

Led by peasant women organizers, AMP scored a major victory in March, 2010, after staging a long march and sit-in. Thirty-thousand tenants, women and children shut down the Multan-Lahore expressway for over ten hours and succeeded in securing ownership rights from the Government of Punjab. The government agreed that transfer of land ownership was to start with immediate effect and that a committee for monitoring of the process for transfer of land to tenants would include representatives of the Women's Peasant Society and AMP.

While in Islamabad, we spent time with two groups of workers involved in long demonstrations for economic rights. The first was a group of nine men who, for the past month, had been occupying a tent outside the city's Press Center. They represent 491 former employees of the Federal Bureau of Statistics, all of whom were suddenly fired from their jobs before their contracts were finished. They suspect that their jobs are now being filled with new employees hired on the basis of patronage and not merit. The nine we met

with were all college educated and probably considered middle class before they lost their jobs. However, many of them were the sole providers for households ranging from 8-10 in number. The group aims to remain in the streets, in protest, until their jobs are reinstated.

The second group of workers we interviewed was from the All Pakistan Clerks Association. The clerks were in their third month of public protest. They had moved, the previous day, to an encampment in front of the parliament where they demanded that Members of Parliament devise a budget that would give the clerks a pay raise proportionate to inflation and commensurate with salaries of the police, army and the judiciary. They explained to us that the army, police and judiciary have received consistent pay raises and healthcare benefits; meanwhile, civil society has been abandoned. One man said, "Our pay only covers utilities. We have no remaining money for health care or education. How can we care for our children?" Solidarity demonstrations with the All Clerks Association occurred across the country and picked up in number and intensity after June 3rd when the police baton charged the clerks and members of United Teachers Association in front of the parliament. The clerks intended to remain in protest until the announcement of the 2010-2011 budget on June 15th.

With the announcement by Pakistan's Finance Minister, Abdul Hafeez Shaikh, that the country's defense spending will be raised to more than 5 billion beginning July 1st, a 17 percent increase from last year, it's unlikely that the clerks will receive the raises and benefits they've sought.

Since Pakistan's inception, the military has been a dominant force in running both internal politics and foreign policy. In *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan's Political Economy of Defense*, Ayesha Jalal notes that the Pakistani government has faced a menacing set of challenges on the domestic, regional and international fronts that have tipped the balance in favor of the military and civil bureaucracies which were not elected democratically.

Additionally, as detailed in a recent report by Amnesty International, residents in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) "continue to be governed by a colonial-era law, the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) of 1901, which denies basic constitutional rights and protections for the residents of FATA, including their rights to political representation, judicial appeal, and freedom from collective punishment."

Pakistan faced a considerable increase in external pressure from the United States after the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Pakistan's greater significance in Western security calculations bolstered Pakistan's strategic defenses, leading to bloated defense budgets that the country didn't have the resources and capacity to meet. Pressure to increase military spending and expand military powers "intensified Pakistan's internal socio-economic and political dilemmas," Ayesha Jalal writes. "The negative impact of economic policies geared to sustain the needs of defense and requirements of international allies contributed to a wide array of social disaffections." The pattern has really remained largely the same ever since.

During the Bush-Mush years, (President George W. Bush and General Pervez Musharraf headed the U.S. and Pakistan, respectively), the U.S. gave Pakistan 11.9 billion dollars in assistance, 8 billion of which went directly to the military. Now, the Obama Administration is insisting on more military offensives in the northwest parts of the country while Pakistan wrestles with the aftermath of a 2009 military offensive that displaced 3.5 million people,

hundreds of thousands of whom still live as refugees. Following the 2009 military operations in Swat and neighboring provinces, the Pakistani armed forces began attacks against alleged militant strongholds in North and South Waziristan, creating new waves of displacement as people were forced to abandon their homes. Continued military operations will require funding, which then diverts needed resources that might otherwise be used to assist remaining refugees, alleviate poverty and reduce wealth disparities.

The military operations are taking place in an almost total media vacuum, in an area which Amnesty International has called a "human rights free zone." Amnesty has documented that over 1,300 civilians were killed in last year's fighting in northwest Pakistan and that the Pakistani government has indefinitely detained some 2,500 people without bringing any charges against them. Thirteen hundred people killed? That's nearly as many lives as were lost during the 2008- 2009 Israeli massacre in Gaza, and where is the outcry? 2,500 people detained and likely tortured? Guantanamo has a long way to go to catch up to those statistics. "It's the opposite of enforcing the rule of the law," says Saman Zia Zarifi, the director of Amnesty Asia-Pacific. "This is moving towards chaos."

The U.S. has insisted that Pakistan undertake military offensives that attack their own people. Meanwhile, U.S. drone strikes kill and maim many hundreds of Pakistanis. Exactly how many? It's difficult to say. "Killing or violating even one person is wrong," Dr. Hassan advised us. "The use of weapons against non-combatants is wrong." These wrongs fuel distrust and hatred of the United States across Pakistan.

Pakistanis also suffer as a result of U.S. and NATO supply convoys that travel through Pakistan en route to Afghanistan. Just outside Islamabad, on June 8, 2010, militants attacked 50 NATO supply trucks headed for Afghanistan. Seven people were killed and 20 trucks were set ablaze. Just as there is no accountability when the CIA destroys a family home from a drone strike, it is doubtful that the United States offers any compensation to those who are injured or have lost family members as a result of an attack on a supply convoy. In fact, we met a young Afghan man who was hired by NATO as a convoy driver three years ago and who, earlier this year, while driving with a NATO convoy, drove over an Improvised Explosive Device (IED). The explosion shattered his leg. He received no compensation whatsoever from NATO forces.

Pakistanis also face increased militant and terrorist attacks in their cities as a result of U.S. policy. Continued U.S. interference serves as a recruitment tool for extremists. Militant and religious organizations train others to attack population centers and marginalized minority groups within Pakistani society. Recently, a Taliban group attacked two Ahmadi mosques in Lahore, killing over 80 people. Obviously, this kind of behavior cannot be attributed solely to the United States, but the U.S. government has to face its history of fostering and arming radical Islamic movements in South Asia when it suited U.S. geo-strategic interest. And after increased U.S. operations in the country since 2004, U.S. policy seems to be intensifying rather than decreasing militancy. Since the Pakistani government's military offensives in the spring of 2009, launched under great pressure from the United States, hundreds of Pakistani civilians have been killed by retaliatory terror attacks.

With 60 million people living in poverty and many more living just above the poverty line, the people of Pakistan have priorities that do not include acting as a proxy to fight U.S. wars against purported terrorists. For many people, including those like Muhammad Akbar, a desperate rickshaw driver who committed suicide on Wednesday due to prolonged financial hardships, these priorities may be simply to put food on the table and to provide for their

families. For others, including women's and minority groups, fighting for their own political and human rights takes precedence.

People in the United States wishing to show solidarity with Pakistanis struggling to make ends meet should try to dialogue with Pakistani led grassroots movements. These indigenous efforts hold the keys to reducing poverty, ending discrimination and countering extremism in the region. We should also simplify our lifestyles and consumption patterns to require less of a share in the world's resources, so that corrupt institutions like the U.S. government and the IMF do not have a pretext or a supposed mandate to continue interfering in the lives of others in order to serve the so-called U.S. "national interest."

We would do well to heed Dr. Mubashir Hassan's words. "Please leave us to our fate and to our devices," he requested. "We'll mess up, but we'll get there." He added that in spite of anxieties that his country is unraveling, there is still something hopeful. It's this: perhaps people will be shown the result of violence and be prepared to believe that war doesn't solve anything.

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