
Imperialism, Extremism, and the Withering State

Imran Ali

The multiple crises that Pakistan faces in the post-Musharraf period appear to be of an almost existential nature. The resumption of a democratically elected civilian government following the elections of February 2008, and the subsequent removal of Musharraf in mid-2008, have failed to alleviate the sense of crisis, but rather have elevated it to even the level of chaos for certain Western analysts. Perhaps as a corollary to the transition to democracy, and in contrast to their silence during the period of dictatorship, these interlocutors are depicting Pakistan as a fragile and failing state about to be overtaken by religious extremists. Having reached an impasse in Afghanistan with a foreign invasion and occupation that is already longer in duration than World War II, the West is possibly eyeing Pakistan as the next extended battleground in its Global War against Terrorism. This dangerous enterprise could include the possible balkanization of the country, if that better serves imperialist designs. This essay attempts to enquire how and why the people of Pakistan have come to face such dire prospects.

Pakistan experienced strong continuities from colonial to post-colonial political economy. The entrenched authority of a triad of power and resource absorption emerged during British rule from the construction an extensive canal system and subsequent agricultural colonization in the Indus basin, which then served as the backbone of the Pakistani economy. The triad consisted of the military, which gained extensive landed resources through soldier settlement and breeding schemes for military animals (especially the soon-to-be obsolete cavalry horses); the civil and irrigation bureaucracy that managed this hydraulic society; and the larger landowners who were imperialism's favored intermediaries. Much more extensively, new land was allotted to the upper peasantry, comprising the traditional landowning lineages. The rural masses were excluded from proprietary or even occupancy access to canal irrigated land. Allied to the British, the landlord segment could leverage the support from the upper peasantry to determine factional access through electoral politics. Through such alliances, the nationalist movement remained stunted, and Pakistan failed to develop a counterpart to the Congress Party that stabilized Indian political economy in the half century after independence. One contributing factor was the emasculation of the professional and entrepreneurial middle class, which at Partition had to exit to India since it was predominantly non-Muslim.

In Pakistan, the ruling triad, in its endeavor to deny democracy to the people, went back for support in the post-colonial era to the new imperial hegemon, the United States. The



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repeated relapse into military dictatorship cemented this relationship of vassalage, with the US preferring to deal with military autocrats over elected politicians, but also demanding of the military a role ever more malign for the welfare of Pakistan itself. For a poverty stricken country, the maintenance of a million-strong military was hardly justified by the presumed objective: defense against Indian belligerence. More likely, Western interests were being served by having a sizeable and pliant force abreast of western Asia's oil resources, and to provide a counter for any southern expansion by the Soviet Union. Like the British Indian army, maintained from domestic revenues, the fiscal burden of maintaining the Pakistani military was met by the hapless people of Pakistan itself. With the failure of substantive direct taxation, through a combination of inefficiency and corruption, but also to placate intermediary groups, the shift in revenue generation to indirect taxes, especially from the early 1990s, placed this material burden squarely on the masses. Moreover, the opportunity cost of the deprivation of democracy, and of the starving of social sector funding, was incalculable.

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The shift in vassalage to a more onerous mode in the 1980s, under the Zia-ul-Haq dictatorship, involved the CIA-sponsored "*jihad*" against the Soviets in Afghanistan. The West could gloat over the winning of a bloodless independence for eastern Europe and the Central Asian republics; at the cost, however, of a million dead and over five million displaced in Afghanistan, and with Pakistan awash with drugs and arms. The last, along with the breakdown in transparency and accountability, was the price paid to local intermediaries for their incipient lack of opposition to the Afghan "*jihad*." The enhanced foreign assistance under Zia was another way to feed rent-seeking intermediaries, whether in business, the public sector, politics, or the intelligentsia. Significantly, prior to and after the Zia dictatorship, periods of civilian rule saw dramatically reduced foreign aid flows; and in the 1990s, Pakistan was not only demonized at the behest of India, but even suffered sanctions for responding to India's nuclear tests. The economic malaise that Pakistan suffered constituted the opportunity cost of not having dictatorship.

Currently, and several years into the imperialist invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, anarcho-vassalage in Pakistan has taken an even more virulent turn. With the emergence of a movement of national resistance in Afghanistan, narrated in the West through such euphemisms as "Taliban insurgency" and "al-Qa'ida terrorism," and with the resurgence in that country of a narco-economy under the noses of US-NATO occupation forces, the regionalization of the war and its inevitable spread to Pakistan has gained lethal momentum. The repeated killing of civilians in both countries by the "civilized" West, and grave misgivings over its long term designs, has forsaken support for its cause. Simultaneously, the legitimacy of an already frayed vassal apparatus has suffered further erosion, as Pakistan has been goaded into killing its own people, while the roots of the problem lie in the continued foreign occupation of a neighboring country. There can be no blank check for civil war: military action against internal enemies is only viable if accompanied by an expeditious phaseout of occupation troops from Afghanistan. Meanwhile, an emerging politicized and alarmist narrative of chaos-mongering on Pakistan's own viability, from "experts" centered on Washington's military-security establishment, is a further destabiliz-

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ing element. This has a detrimental impact on business and investment confidence, and on international perceptions.

This is not to say that the “Taliban” in Pakistan should not be confronted. They pose an evident threat to national stability, and a misogynist challenge to civilized values. The solution, however, does not lie and cannot be achieved in Pakistan. It rests solidly with the exit of Western occupation forces from Afghanistan, without which peace appears unattainable. The prolonging of Western aggression could lead “withering” Pakistan itself to spiral into uncontrollable instability, the consequences of which are difficult to comprehend. However, just as the “Taliban” appear unconscionably committed to their Islamist extremism, the West is also likely to remain hostage to its entrenched imperialist values, mindless of the slaughter of Muslims that such policies have perpetrated since the mid-20th century. Regardless of the truth, there are apprehensions in Pakistan that violent militancy is being funded by India, the United States, and Israel. It appears that sectarian tension has for some time been encouraged by Saudi Arabia and Iran, using a poor country for a proxy conflict.

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External interventions have combined with internal weaknesses and distortions to enhance the complexity of Pakistan’s problems. The failed elite has violated moral economy through deinstitutionalization, extreme economic inequality and continued resource transfer, processes which the Western-preferred military rule has actively abetted. The Pakistani establishment also failed to curb a growing *madrassa* culture and *jihadi* mobilization, operating under cover of a general over-emphasis on religion and cultural atavism. Through misgovernance, public mismanagement, and a lack of services, the state had already ceded much control on the ground to virtually criminalized intermediaries. This has left a void that could be exploited by religious radicalism. The Pakistani people need a national movement to gain real, rather than nominal, freedom, but this might now metamorphasize into foreign aggression, civil war, or violent revolution.

Despite the challenges it faces, Pakistan can hardly be written off as a failing state. With the world’s largest contiguous irrigation system, a cultivated area in excess of 20 million hectares, a livestock herd equivalent in numbers to that of the EU and USA, and an extensive arable crop mix, the country has huge potential for food and textile production. In most economic and social indicators — including telecommunications densities, per capita exports, and energy consumption — Pakistan remains ahead of India. With improvements in the existing low level of regional economic integration, Pakistan can benefit from increased trade and investment flows within South Asia. High population growth levels can be an opportunity, but also pose risks for political stability. Unlike the global recessionary trends, demand levels remain high in Pakistan, straining supply systems and creating inflationary spirals. While intensely involved in the geo-strategic elements of globalization, Pakistan has been a neglected area for international investment. Therefore, it is imperative that regional peace be secured, otherwise the welfare of 180 million people will be further threatened.