
Post-1979 Pakistan: What Went Wrong?

Touqir Hussain

No single year has reflected and effected more significant changes in the Islamic world than 1979. Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran were epicenters as well as tributaries, and confluences of the history-making events of that year.

The year began with the Iranian Revolution, which immediately changed the strategic landscape not only of the Persian Gulf but also of the entire Middle East. In April 1979 in Pakistan, an elected Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was executed by a military dictator, Zia ul-Haq, laying the foundation for an 11-year army rule that, on the one hand, unleashed the army's overweening political and strategic ambitions and, on the other, set in motion the process of the Islamization of the country. The two merged as part of a religiously denominated national security doctrine that turned Pakistan's regional policy into a *jihad*.

In November 1979, the holy sites in Mecca were occupied by an anti-monarchy group. False rumors that American forces had entered these sites to help Saudis end the siege led to the burning of the US Embassy in Islamabad and the start of a wave of anti-Americanism in Pakistan that already had been incited by US-Pakistan tensions over the nuclear issue and the Iranian Revolution. The same month saw the beginning of the American hostage crisis in Tehran, unfolding three decades of Iranian-US tensions and feeding anti-Americanism in the entire Islamic world. Pakistani and Iranian anti-Americanism came to reinforce each other, providing the nucleus of a broader sentiment against the US in the Islamic world. Pakistan embarked on a national vision that made it vulnerable to political Islam.

The year's most consequential event occurred in December, when Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan. The US-led *jihad* against the Soviets in Afghanistan, assisted by Pakistan under the military rule of Zia ul-Haq, laid the foundation of an extremist religious infrastructure that not only served US strategic interests but also helped other Islamic countries and fueled especially the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. The forces unleashed by these actions had a horrendously adverse impact on the region and on US and global security.

General Zia had begun to give new meaning to the concepts of war, conflict, and *jihad*. *Jihad* no longer remained defensive, but became an offensive war. Thus during Zia's time was born Pakistani-style jihadist Islam, spawning a whole generation of militants. The



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army became its major stakeholder. Indeed, many personal ambitions also came to find focus on it. Understandable security concerns were inflated by the army's political ambitions and institutional pride, making rivalry and competition with India an end in and of itself. A powerful army began feeding on a weak and insecure state and, of course, on US aid.

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cy, the ISI. First Afghanistan and then Pakistan became the home of this radicalism, which began searching for new targets within and beyond the region.

The army, especially the ISI, enhanced its potential to find new targets during the *jihad* against the Soviets in the 1980s. Following their victory over the Soviets, the Americans had left behind a broken Afghanistan, a restive jihad, and an embittered Pakistan — abandoned and sanctioned for its nuclear program in October 1990.

Isolated and suffused with anti-Americanism, Pakistan was left to its own devices. The national purpose yielded to illusions, emotions, and a passion for dangerous causes. The army and the *jihad* found easy targets of opportunity and new causes — Kashmir and then the Taliban. In the process, both Afghanistan and Pakistan played havoc with each other, in the end becoming tributaries and confluences of extremist influences.

During the so-called “decade of democracy” in the 1990s, Pakistan's leading politicians played along by outbidding each other in their commitment to Islam and support for the army's ambitions. Islam, which always had been important to Pakistan's national identity, became populist. And populist and political Islam began beating to the rhythm of global Islamic revivalism, whose focus was on anti-Americanism.

This national vision, embraced by years of authoritarian rule and deformed democracy, led to a weak institutional architecture that collided with the crosscurrents of sectarian, ethno-linguistic, and other domestic tensions, opening up Pakistan to instability.

As institutions crumbled and became adjuncts to centers of power, the rule of law and social stability were degraded and preyed on by the forces of extremism. The state lacked the political will, moral authority, and effective instruments of law and order. The worst affected were the weak and vulnerable strata of society who, lacking physical and economic security, could do no more than despair and contemplate extreme and illusory avenues to empowerment, including radical Islamism.

Although the majority of people were moderate, and remain so, they were becoming vulnerable to radical thought and propaganda and losing a sense of national direction. Pakistan was becoming fractious and ungovernable.

It was this troubled Pakistan with which a deeply unpopular America re-engaged after 9/11 to fight a war that was unpopular to begin with and became more so as it came to sustain an authoritarian ruler. Pakistanis feel that Pervez Musharraf's partnership with Washington harmed the country, especially as the war on terrorism came to undermine Pakistan's stability through suicide attacks, challenged its sovereignty, and threatened its territorial integrity by fomenting religious-based nationalism in the smaller provinces.

Pakistan now faces an existential threat. Where do we go from here? Indeed, all stakeholders have a role to play in influencing Pakistan's future. But the vision for the future must be different. The Pakistani army needs to rethink its national role and relationship with the people. By over-reaching, the army has brought Pakistan to grief. In the end, if the army is consumed by its strategic over-extension and overweening political ambitions, it may be left as the sole guarantor of Pakistan's survival and will be as much the loser as the people of Pakistan. For the politicians, too, this is the last chance for redemption. The Islamists also must join the fight against the radicals because if the country collapses it will be their turn, and that is not an option, for them or for Pakistan.

The Pakistani people also need to change their attitudes, especially their outlook on religion. Suffused with anti-Americanism and religious fervor, Pakistanis are filtering their worldview through the prism of religion and the tensions between Islam and the West, making them vulnerable to the radical propaganda and paralyzing their will to act against forces of extremism.

The United States, too, needs a strategic change in its Pakistan policy. A way has to be found to harmonize US strategic interests, Pakistan's core national interests, and people's aspirations for empowerment and good governance. Pakistan will remain a crucial partner in fighting extremism and terrorism, but only a stable and reformed Pakistan can be a useful partner. Therefore, the biggest challenge for the United States is to craft policies in and towards Pakistan that help not just the latter's governing elite and American strategic interests but the people of Pakistan and a reformed vision of Pakistan. A reformed Pakistan headed toward moderation is likely to find America's interests to be consistent with its own.

Given the enormity of the self-inflicted damage to the country, mere survival has been a great achievement. Hopefully, the Swat operation represents the first stirrings of the changes that are necessary to ensure not just that the country survives but that it prospers.