

From FATA to the NWFP: The Taliban Spread their Grip in Pakistan

By Hassan Abbas

YEARS OF NEGLECT, incompetence in governance and failure to devise an effective policy in the realm of fighting religious extremism has provided an opportunity for the Taliban and other extremist groups to expand their activities and influence in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). Continuing instability in Afghanistan and the progressive loosening of the government's writ in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) has exacerbated the crisis. Pakistan also experienced a prolonged transition from General Pervez Musharraf's rule to a democratic dispensation, and this proved to be a distraction that opened up more avenues for extremist forces to plan and implement their expansionist vision. A weakening of the independent judiciary further diminished the potential of the state as well as society to check the overall deterioration of law and order in the NWFP.

Any effort to stem the tide of extremism in the NWFP first requires a dispassionate analysis of the ground realities. This article attempts to examine such indicators, by explaining how the Taliban have managed to spread their influence from FATA into the NWFP, and will present some ideas on how to reverse extremist trends.

Emerging Trends in NWFP

There are a number of emerging trends in the NWFP that reveal how the Taliban are increasing their influence.

Security Zones

Of the NWFP's 24 districts, the government of Pakistan has declared eight districts as high security zones, which means that Taliban activities are expanding and the chances of terrorist attacks have increased.¹ These districts are Peshawar, Mardan, Kohat, Bannu, Dera Ismail Khan, Nowshera, Abbottabad and Tank. Five of these districts (or their frontier regions) border different FATA agencies (Peshawar: Khyber Agency;

Kohat: Orakzai Agency; Bannu: North Waziristan Agency; Dera Ismail Khan: South Waziristan Agency; and Tank: South Waziristan Agency). Clearly, increased disturbances and militancy in FATA is pouring into the neighboring settled districts of the NWFP. Based on historical trends, this development was predictable, and it is surprising why Pakistan did not fortify the defenses of the settled areas earlier. The government cannot claim that it was unaware of this emerging threat as only six districts of the NWFP were declared "normal" for elections on February 18, 2008.²

Suicide Bombings

A total of 324 blasts in Pakistan, including 28 suicide attacks, during the first eight months of 2008 left more than 619 people dead.³ A significant number of these attacks occurred in the NWFP and the adjacent FATA area. In 2007, the highest number of suicide attacks targeted the region—of the 56 suicide attacks during 2007, 23 were in FATA and 21 in the NWFP—including unprecedented attacks on mosques and jirga gatherings.⁴ Previously, such locations rarely came under attack. For the Taliban, another recent innovation has been its attempt to recruit young girls and women for suicide attacks.⁵

Nature of Targets

In comparison to FATA, where Pakistan's security forces face the brunt of attacks from Taliban and other al-Qa`ida-affiliated groups, the types and nature of attacks in the NWFP have a different focus: enforcing an extremist version of religious ideals. For instance, targets included a population welfare office in Swabi,⁶ dozens of girls' schools,⁷ Swat's Buthgarh Jehanabad historical site containing rocks engraved with Buddha images,⁸ women with "immoral

character,"⁹ video and music shops, and at times barber shops due to their practice of shaving beards. Among these targets, most instructive perhaps is the regularity of attacks on girls' schools; Taliban and affiliated militant groups destroyed 125 girls' schools during the last 10 months in Swat area alone.¹⁰ These incidents cannot fall into the category of retaliatory attacks.

Law Enforcement Failure

In many cases, civilians in the NWFP reached out to the police force, but to little benefit. There is a widely held view in the NWFP that the police are either helpless or unwilling to challenge the Taliban's expanding influence.¹¹ Consequently, the Taliban often perform a police role in certain districts (such as in Tank) where they even arrest criminals and parade them through the streets for public display.¹² These moves serve two key purposes for the Taliban: they show people that the Taliban can perform better than the police and hence can govern the area, and they create fear, which has a strong psychological effect on ordinary civilians. Additionally, the Taliban now ask locals in certain settled areas of the NWFP to bring their cases and complaints to Taliban religious courts rather than before the country's civil courts.¹³ Failure to invest in local civilian law enforcement agencies has played a crucial role in the declining capacity of NWFP police.

Open Threats to Government

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a relatively new formation under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud, now feels empowered to confidently threaten the NWFP government and issue ultimatums.¹⁴ This is happening

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13 Akhtar Amin, "Taliban Set Up Illegal Courts in FATA, NWFP," *Daily Times*, June 29, 2008.

14 For background on Tehrik-i-Taliban, see Hassan Abbas, "A Profile of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan," *CTC Sentinel* 1:2 (2008).

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2 Zulfiqar Ali, "Only Six of 24 NWFP Districts 'Normal' for Polls," *Dawn*, February 5, 2008.

3 Javed Aziz Khan, "Pakistan Tops South Asian States in Violence," *The News*, August 30, 2008.

4 Ashfaq Yusufzai, "Challenges 2007-2008: Spate of Suicide Bombings Augur Ill for Pakistan," Inter Press Service, December 24, 2008.

5 Ashfaq Yusufzai, "Pakistan: School Girls Lured to Suicide Bombings," Inter Press Service, July 18, 2008.

6 "Tailor's Shop Blown Up in Bajaur," *Daily Times*, September 7, 2007.

7 Reza Sayah, "Pakistan: Bomb Destroys Girls' School," CNN, July 25, 2008.

8 Hameedullah Khan, "Buddha Images Survive Blasts in

with more frequency since the success of comparatively progressive political forces in the February 18 elections. It is evident that government “peace” talks offered in April and May of this year made the TTP more aggressive in its demands, and the government now acknowledges this mistake.¹⁵ Rahman Malik, Pakistan’s interior advisor, said publicly that the TTP is “an extension of Al Qaeda” and the two organizations have close ties.¹⁶ There are also strong indicators that installing Sufi Muhammad of Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat- e-Mohammadi (TNSM) in Swat failed to reduce the effectiveness and control of his son-in-law, Maulana Fazlullah, in the Swat area. Only a military operation and the imposition of curfew have placed TNSM cadres on the defensive.

Sectarianism

Attacks against Shi`a Muslims have also increased in the NWFP, especially in Dera Ismail Khan.¹⁷ Peshawar is also in the grip of such attacks.¹⁸ In a recent attack in Dera Ismail Khan, a TTP operative murdered a Shi`a man; later, a suicide bomber went to the hospital where the deceased man’s body was taken and blew himself up in the midst of his grieving relatives, killing approximately 30 people.¹⁹ Sectarianism is not new in Pakistan, but its intensity has increased. Shi`a-Sunni tribal confrontation in Kurram Agency is also having an impact in the NWFP.

Peshawar: A Brief Case Study

A brief survey of developments in Peshawar demonstrates the potential and ambitions of extremist forces. Although media assessments that Peshawar, the capital of the NWFP, is facing an imminent takeover by the Taliban are exaggerated,²⁰ there is no doubt that

extremist militias including the Taliban are targeting Peshawar with added zeal and energy. In late August 2008, a girls’ school was bombed in the Badaber area in Peshawar District, which was the first attack of this kind in a provincial metropolis.²¹ Secondly, Mangal Bagh, the head of Lashkar-i-Islami, who is essentially a warlord operating in Khyber Agency,²² is introducing his “projects” in Peshawar District apparently without any hindrance.²³ He is believed to have sympathizers in the security forces due to his anti-Taliban stance, which at best is a political position because his religious ideals are quite similar to those of the Taliban. For instance, he has asked men to grow beards, wear caps and keep their ankles visible (a very conservative Islamic requirement) to avoid beatings. A large number of people have purchased caps to avoid being killed.²⁴

Additionally, the small-arms fire that recently targeted the vehicle of the chief U.S. diplomat in the city also indicates the increasing threat to foreigners, especially to Americans. Khyber Agency, which is adjacent to Peshawar and is the supply route for NATO forces in Afghanistan, has also emerged as a new center of Taliban activity, as ambushes on convoys have become more frequent.²⁵

The new NWFP coalition government led by the Awami National Party (ANP) and the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) appears to understand the consequences of this threat more than the previous government led by an alliance of religious parties, but this realization has not yet translated into action. Nevertheless, an anti-terrorist force of 7,000 men has been raised recently to tackle “Talibanization,” marking a good first step.²⁶ Yet, the people of the

province who voted these forces into power over the religious parties expected quicker and more significant action.

Conclusion

The prevalent view within Pakistan generally and in the NWFP specifically is that direct U.S. military operations and Pakistani security force action in FATA are a lead cause of Taliban retaliation in the settled areas of Pakistan. Only recently has Pakistan’s political leadership started emphasizing that the growing unrest is a direct problem to Pakistan, and not just to the United States. Training and equipping the Frontier Corps is not a substitute for providing adequate resources to the NWFP police. As a recent RAND study stipulates, effective law enforcement is critical to defeat terrorists.

The nature of Taliban expansion clearly shows that the religious worldview of the Taliban is also instrumental in this matrix and little is being done to counter it. Talibanization can be effectively challenged by religious leaders in the NWFP who can expose the Taliban’s deviant ideology. The question is whether the Pakistani government will (or can) provide security to those who are willing to undertake these challenges. Militants cannot be isolated without such measures despite the fact that as a whole they are few in numbers. The warning of Maulana Fazl-ur-Rehman, the head of a faction of Jamiat-i-Ulama-i-Islam (JUI-F) and a member of the ruling coalition, should be taken seriously when he contends that “it’s just a matter of months before news comes that the entire North-West Frontier Province has slipped out of control.”²⁷ Indeed, without immediate remedial measures, what is happening in FATA today may very well be tomorrow’s reality in parts of the NWFP.

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19 “DI Khan Blast,” *The News*, August 21, 2008; “Editorial: A Sectarian War,” *The News*, August 23, 2008; “What is Your Name?” *The News*, September 5, 2008.

20 Nick Meo, “Pakistani City of Peshawar Could Fall to Taliban as Fear and Attacks Grow,” *Daily Telegraph*, Au-

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22 Mangal Bagh has recently relocated to the Landikotal sub-district of Khyber Agency.

23 Dr. Farrukh Saleem, “Emir Mangal Bagh,” *The News*, August 3, 2008.

24 “Editorial: Mangal Bagh Still Rules Khyber,” *Daily Times*, September 1, 2008.

25 Zahid Hussain, “Taliban ‘Siege’ of Peshawar Threatens Pakistan’s Grip,” *The Times*, June 26, 2008.

26 Zeeshan Haider, “Taliban Bring Vigilante Law to Pakistan’s Peshawar,” Reuters, June 27, 2008.

27 The comment was made in the National Assembly of Pakistan. See Haider, “Taliban Bring Vigilante Law to Pakistan’s Peshawar.”