

Swat: Main Causes of the Rise of Militancy

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Summary

Failure to integrate Swat fully into Pakistan may have been the main cause of the unrest in this district since the late 1990s. Secondly, Local Government Reforms since 2001 opened up further space for militants by demolishing the magistracy system that maintained the writ of the state. The interconnected religious, military and political history of the Pakhtun regions resonated with the Taliban's call to Jihad.

Issues of landless peasants and conflict between tenants and landlords, and demand for justice stoked the turbulence and created initial support for the militants. Their land redistribution schemes were partly popular among the dispossessed. The Taliban made effective use of radio broadcasts to gain supporters for their ideology, issued edicts and garnered donations. Women were particularly targeted through the Mullah FM radio. The military operation in Swat since 2009 has the support of the majority of the people.

However, there is a need for the military presence to be gradually phased out under an exit strategy. An effective civilian administration and policing system should be introduced as the army draws down. Special attention should be placed on rebuilding infrastructure and improving the livelihoods of the landless and most vulnerable in society. An effective communication strategy coupled with a re-conciliation programme based on the Pakhtun social processes and idiom remains pivotal for long-term security.

Introduction

The district of Swat is part of the Malakand division in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP)¹. A census in 1998 found the population at more than 1.2 million. Governance of Swat is performed by the provincial government but under the provisions of Article 247 of the Constitution under which the region is treated as a provincially administered tribal area (PATA). This method of administration restricts the authority of the government of KP and its legislature. Since the 1990s, the authority of the provincial government in Swat has been challenged. The *Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi* (TNSM)² was first established in Swat in 1992 by a religious leader, Sufi Muhammad. He demanded the introduction of an Islamic justice system and frequently revolted against official authority.

In 2001, President Pervez Musharraf banned the TNSM and had Sufi Muhammad jailed after his group took active part in fighting the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan. Muhammad's son-in-law, Maulana Fazlullah, also known as "Mullah Radio," subsequently took control of the TNSM/Taliban in Swat. For a brief period in mid-2007, TNSM had effectively expelled government writ and controlled large parts of the district.

In 2008, the provincial government in KP facilitated the release of Sufi Muhammad after he agreed to renounce violence. Other leaders of the TNSM signed a peace agreement that recognised KP's sovereignty over Swat. After much controversy, the government of the KP made a deal with the Taliban in Swat in February

¹ From 2010, the province was renamed from North West Frontier Province (NWFP) to "Khyber Pakhtunkhwa".

² TNSM translate into Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Law. Hereafter the term Taliban will be used to also encompass TNSM.

2009. Under this regulation the government agreed to implement Sharia law in the wider Malakand division. Soon thereafter, Maulana Fazlullah's followers violated the peace terms. They also forcibly took over the adjoining district of Buner. The Taliban's expressed demand was the introduction of Sharia law but it seemed in effect a process of strategic domination.

Popular opinion turned against the Taliban, which facilitated re-establishment of state control. In May 2009, the Pakistani army launched a military operation to wrest control of the districts of Buner and Swat from the Taliban. More than 600 000 of the residents of Swat became IDPs. The army gradually established control and the displaced population was able to return in significant numbers by late 2009.

This policy brief attempts to outline some of the main reasons why the government was sidelined and the TNSM/Taliban thus were able to rapidly increase their influence since 2002. The analysis and recommendations in this policy brief are partly based on a survey conducted in Swat by the Regional Institute for Policy Research and Training (RIPORT) in February 2010.³ The survey included in-depth interviews with district officials and key informants, focus group discussions, and a questionnaire survey of 384 random households.

Brief History

The Swat region saw various invasions over the centuries. From the 8th century AD, the area was gradually converted to Islam. By the 14th century, the Pakthun tribe of the Yusufzais began infiltrating into the Swat Valley. The Yusufzais gained political prominence and partly displaced the original inhabitants. The Islamic State of Swat was first established in 1849. In 1917, a local Jirga (council) appointed Mian Gul Abdul Wadud as the new ruler, or Wali, of Swat. The Wali ruled autocratically but co-opted both landlords and religious elements into his patronage network. However, Swat became progressively more closely linked to British India and subsequently to Pakistan both economically and politically. In 1969, the state of Swat was merged into the regular administration of Pakistan.

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The Role of Religion

Religious sentiments and religious authorities have played a key role in political and military affairs in the Pakhtun-inhabited lands for hundreds of years. Especially in times of invasions and external occupation, the call for Jihad (holy war) and the role of religious leaders have been prominent. Through

shared religious affiliation the otherwise tribal fissures could be overcome. Calls for Jihad were made against Sikhs in the seventeenth century when they occupied what is now KP and later in 1847 when the British replaced the Sikhs as the paramount power.

Islam has played a key role in the history of Pakistan itself. In 1949, the Pakistan Constituent Assembly passed a resolution for all laws to be in consonance with Islam. The wars of 1947, 1965 and 1971 against India were steeped in religious narrative. With the advent of Zia-ul-Haq, and later the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the western border of Pakistan became a veritable jihadist base that attracted foreign mujahedin.

The ties between religiously inspired groups and officialdom in Pakistan continued after the withdrawal of the Soviet Union from Afghanistan in 1989, and the subsequent disinterest of the U.S. in Afghan affairs. Jihadist training camps were tolerated and supported on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border. Training camps and jihadist bases continued to exist in parts of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) after 2001.

Thus, the Taliban of Swat had ample historical as well as mythological resonance for their call for resistance, Jihad and religious revival. 83% of respondents in the RIPORT survey opined that people of Swat were influenced by religious personalities. 67% of respondent households agreed there is a close connection between religious education and militancy. 67% also had the opinion that calls for Jihad against the U.S. in Afghanistan had encouraged militancy in Swat. A full 78% agreed that the Pakistani government's alliance with the U.S. in the "war on terror" had encouraged people to support militants. 70% of the households stated that the Afghan Taliban assisted Swat militants.

The Role of the Land Issue

In the late fifteenth century, the Pakthun tribe of the Yusufzais started to forcefully occupy Swat. After the conquest, the lands were taken over by the new military nobility. The people who originally possessed these lands were scattered into the mountains or were employed as tenants by the new rulers.⁴ When Swat was finally merged into Pakistan in 1969, the ruler of Swat had proscribed the holding of land by non-Pakhtuns. To some degree the nobility was composed of Yusufzais, while the non-Yusufzais formed the lower classes in society.

During the period of Taliban rule in Swat from 2008, there was a lot of violence committed against the

³ Aziz, Khalid (2010) "Swat: The Main Causes of the Breakdown of Governance and Rise of Militancy". RIPORT. The report is available at Saeed Book Bank. Islamabad.

⁴ The dispossessed are today called Gujars and Kohistanis within Swat. Both these terms are considered to be pejorative.



landed aristocracy. Many of them left their farms and homes and took refuge in other parts of the country. The Taliban in Swat started redistribution of property previously held by big, feudal landholders. This might have attracted followers to the Taliban, at least initially.⁵

56% of the respondents of the RIPORT survey were of the view that there was a tense class relationship between the rich and the poor. When the respondents were asked whether class differences in Swat had fanned militancy, 45% said yes, while 44% said that they didn't know, while 11% thought that there was no role of class conflict in creating the militancy. 56% of the Swat households were of the opinion that the denial of land ownership to the Gujars made them more militant and prone to violence.

The Role of Poverty

Poverty can result from many causes. A survey done in KP in 2001 compared the relative position of the 24 districts of the province in terms of six base indicators.⁶ The average infant mortality rate for the province was 79 per 1000 live births, while in Swat the rate was 95.7 per 1000. For malnourishment, Swat was ranked 23rd out of 24 districts. Complications during birth and malnourishment could point to certain cognitive disabilities arising among the population. In terms of primary school enrolment, access to safe drinking water and sanitation, Swat scored on or above the average for the 24 districts.

According to the result of the RIPORT survey, 63% of the households agreed with the view that people joined the militants to improve their livelihoods. 85% held the view that there was a link between poor socio-economic status and militancy. Entering the Taliban leadership hierarchy enabled individuals to share in the spoils. Some key informants disclosed that besides enriching themselves by looting rich households, money was made by selling the rubble of schools and hospitals destroyed by militant activity. 75% thought that unemployment induced youth to join the militants.

The Role of Communication

The Taliban leader of Swat, Maulana Fazlullah, also became known as “Mullah Radio” for his frequent use of an illegal FM radio that was broadcasting in the district. One of the major findings to emerge from the survey was the effective role played by the radio station

in order to gain adherents to their ideology, inform on edicts, and also to act as a vehicle for the collection of donations. 78% of the respondents agreed that the FM radio helped the insurgency to gain a foothold in Swat. 56% agreed that the broadcast had built demand for the introduction of Sharia in Swat. 68% of the respondents agreed that the sermons broadcasted on the FM radio gathered support for the militants.

The Role of Women

One of the more enigmatic aspects of the radio broadcasts from “Mullah Radio” was its effect on women. According to some informants, the militants obtained the loyalties of women by presenting messages through religious interpretations. Some women felt empowered through their ability to call in and discuss problems, a way of interaction previously not available.

Some women began to follow the advice of Mullah Fazlullah. They were encouraged to donate money and were also persuaded to pressurize relatives to join the movement. Largely confined to the home, there was ample time for women to listen to the broadcasts. Some women respondents confessed to have become supporters of the Taliban/TNSM. Paradoxically, some women saw the militants as a liberating influence.

Over a period of time, as the Taliban/TNSM became more entrenched and powerful, they began prompting women via their radio to make donations to their cause. Many female respondents reported that they gave their jewellery, money and in one case, a car, to the Taliban. Some of the pronouncements over the FM radio asked women to convince their husbands to join their ranks; other broadcasts urged women to hit the military and police patrols with stones when they came to their areas.

Governance

Pakistan has four kinds of regulatory spaces provided for its territory under the Constitution. Under Article 246 (b) of the Constitution, Swat is a provincially administered tribal area (PATA). Under Article 247 (2), the President can give directions to the Governor of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa for purposes of administration of Swat. Similarly, under Article 247 (3), the provincial assembly cannot legislate for Swat unless the President approves a legislation to be implemented. When an area is placed under the provision of Article 247 the normal jurisdiction of the courts is ousted, so the right of recourse to High and Supreme Court is denied.

In 1994, the Supreme Court of Pakistan set aside the special provisions for the Malakand division and ordered the area to be governed under normal Pakistani law. But the decisions never took effect. Instead, support grew for Sufi Muhammad's call for exclusive Sharia jurisdiction. From 2002, president

5 Daud Khan Khattak, “The Battle for Pakistan: Militancy and Conflict in Swat Valley,” New America Foundation, Washington, P.5

6 “NWFP: A District-based Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey, 2001,” Planning & Development Department, Govt of North West Frontier Province, Peshawar (2002). The indicators were infant mortality, malnourishment, primary school enrollment, adult literacy, access to safe drinking water, sanitation.

Musharraf introduced Local Governance Reform that undid the joint police magistracy system, which had overseen crime and security aspects in the PATA districts. More power was devolved to local nazims or feudal lords.

56% of the households thought that the reform of local bodies led to the destabilization of administrative structures and provided space to the militants. 75% was of the view that government effectiveness, coordination and quality had declined in the wake of the local government reforms. 67% of the households held that the provincial administration's contacts with militants in Swat also further encouraged them.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Since the army's incursion into Swat in April 2009, the situation has changed. The Taliban no longer reins free in the area although sporadic attacks have occurred. 78% of the respondents stated that the situation had improved since the deployment of the army. 68% thought that the militants had been neutralized. But 89% of the households surveyed in Swat feared that there was every likelihood of bloodshed due to the Pakhtun proclivity to seek vengeance for any perceived wrong (Badal). During the last few years, Swat has been haunted by violent incidents that many families are itching to revenge – once the military leaves the valley.

4 Swat has been thoroughly devastated by the floods of August 2010. This tragedy comes on top of years of repression, devastation and mismanagement. The challenges are enormous. This policy brief would like to highlight a few key steps to be taken:

1. Improve civil-military coordination. Both the military and the civilian administration should have a clear road map for the exit of the military. The longer it stays, the more delayed will be the normalization. The police should be strengthened, trained and equipped to provide security. Militants must be granted due legal process and the possibility of reintegration. Extrajudicial measures are counterproductive. Strategic communication initiatives are crucial.
2. Undertake governance reform. Swat should be administratively mainstreamed and the executive magistrate, the district magistrate and the police re-established in consonance with the model practised prior to 12 October 1999. A comprehensive re-integration and rehabilitation plan should be undertaken in coordination with similar initiatives in FATA. A reform monitoring unit should be established in the Chief Secretary's Office to review the pace and depth of these reforms.
3. Poor and landless people should receive priority in assistance. The focus of investment should be on social protection and targeted safety nets for the very vulnerable. Local communities should be actively involved in deciding priorities.
4. Empowerment of women. Priority of funding must be given to women and female programmes in health, education and skill development and education.
5. Reconstruction of basic infrastructure. The floods have severely disrupted roads, bridges and power lines in Swat. Rebuilding these will be essential for economic recovery.

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