

by Lisa Curtis

Pakistan is in the midst of rapid political shifts that are challenging the leadership's ability to maintain cohesion within the country and even raising questions about the potential for an Islamic revolution by year's end.

Pakistan has long suffered from ethnic and sectarian divisions in different parts of the country. But the recent threat from a well-armed and well-organized Islamist insurgency pushing for the establishment of strict Islamic law in parts of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) adds a new and more dangerous dimension to the country's challenges.

Last week Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari conceded to the Taliban's demand for a comprehensive parallel Islamic courts system in part of the NWFP after the Pakistani parliament passed a resolution urging him to do so, and the Supreme Court released a radical religious leader who advocates turning the country into a theocratic state. These developments signal that Pakistan's leadership is more interested in appeasing--rather than challenging--extremists, which will likely further embolden them to seek their ultimate goal of overthrowing the Pakistani state.

To counter this growing threat, Pakistani leaders must highlight the brutality of the pro-Taliban militants and demonstrate that these radicals are forcing a way of life on Pakistani citizens that is alien to their own historical and religious traditions and aspirations for constitutional democracy.

The struggle is Pakistan's to fight, but the U.S. should do what it can to shore up the civilian leadership and bolster Pakistan's military with the expectation that it will hold the line against Taliban extremists if they seek to impose their violent and destructive agenda in other parts of Pakistan.

The Costs of Surrendering Swat

The government's surrender of the Swat Valley to pro-Taliban militants is a major victory for Islamist extremists seeking to carve out pockets of influence within the country. The government's concessions to the militants not only undercut the Pakistani state and its claim of sovereignty over the region--they allow the area to develop into a terrorist safe haven that will likely become a threat to the rest of the world.

The establishment of a parallel Islamic courts system in the Malakand region of the NWFP (including the Swat Valley) will also have dire human rights consequences for average Pakistanis--especially women and girls--in the region. The pro-Taliban militants have already destroyed numerous girls' schools and engaged in brutal public punishments to instill fear in the

population and quell dissent from their harsh interpretation of Islam.

The recent closing of the civil courts in Swat Valley belies the Pakistan government's claims that the establishment of Islamic courts in the region would not usurp state authority. Tehrik Nifaz-i-Shariat Muhammadi (TNSM) Chief Sufi Mohammad declared that the civil courts were against Shari'a and asked civil judges not to hold proceedings. Mohammad also declared in a recent interview that democracy is not permissible under Shari'a law.

The government's deal with the pro-Taliban militants in Swat amounts to a bargaining away of the people's basic rights embodied within the Pakistani constitution. In early April, Pakistani Chief Justice Iftikhar Ali Chaudhry raised several questions regarding a public flogging of a young woman in Swat (recorded on video), but public discussion of the issue was muddied by Taliban statements saying the government should worry more about drone missile strikes.

The contrast between the Taliban's brand of justice and that for which so many Pakistanis recently protested in the streets to defend is striking. Pakistanis were jubilant last month when Chief Justice Chaudhry was reinstated after having been unceremoniously removed two years ago by former President Pervez Musharraf. But the independence of the judiciary Pakistanis fought so hard to restore is again at risk--this time from the threat of terrorist violence and intimidation. TNSM leader Sufi Mohammed's recent criticism of the Pakistani Supreme Court and high courts for not operating under strict Shari'a reveals the militants' broader goal: undermining Pakistan's democratic institutions.

Radical Gets Released

The Supreme Court's release on bail of Maulana Abdul Aziz, one of the ringleaders of the 2007 Red Mosque stand-off, reinforces the impression that the government is either unwilling or unable to confront anti-state radicals. Aziz had fled the Red Mosque disguised in a burqa shortly before the Pakistan military operation began in July 2007, while his brother remained inside the mosque to die with about 100 other militants. The Supreme Court's decision last week to release Aziz and allow him to rally his supporters in the heart of Islamabad defies logic and is further indication of the fluidity and unpredictability of current developments inside Pakistan.

Many now wonder whether Aziz will again send groups of Islamist vigilantes into Islamabad's markets to intimidate shopkeepers and women. Western media reports indicate that barber shops, music stores, and Internet cafes are receiving threats from extremists in some towns in southern and western Punjab.

A Role for the U.S.

Pakistanis themselves will have to muster the will to stand up to the extremists threatening the stability of the state. U.S. actions and statements, while not the determining factors for Pakistan's future, will have an impact, whether positive and negative. Thus, the U.S. must tread carefully.

Given the high level of anti-American sentiment in the country, Washington will need to work

closely with other countries interested in seeing stability in Pakistan. The Tokyo donors' conference last week that succeeded in raising pledges of over \$5 billion for Pakistan was helpful in demonstrating broad international support for the country. The international community must remain focused on Pakistan, demonstrating to Pakistan the benefits of remaining on the democratic path and engaged internationally.

The U.S. should quietly encourage Pakistan to develop a comprehensive plan of action to counter extremist trends in the country. Such a plan would require Pakistan's federal and provincial civilian leaders and the army to work together.

The U.S. must be careful with its public statements, expressing support for the principles of democracy and importance of respect for human rights while seeking to ensure such statements are not interpreted as interference in Pakistan's domestic affairs. This will be difficult at a time when the U.S. Congress is debating legislation aimed at both vastly increasing economic aid to Pakistan while at the same time adding to this aid necessary standards of accountability and transparency and setting conditions for uprooting terrorism.

The United States is in a tough position. Given the current uncertainty in Pakistan, it may be a bad time to emphasize the need to place conditions on aid. But it would be unrealistic for Islamabad to expect Washington to continue to provide such large sums of aid (especially in light of the global economic climate) without any strings attached. While U.S. commanders, namely Central Commander General David Petraeus, need flexibility and discretion to provide counterinsurgency assistance to the Pakistani military in a rapidly evolving battlefield environment, the U.S. also needs to develop some leverage in order to coax greater cooperation from Pakistan in combating terrorism while setting realistic expectations for results in both Washington and Islamabad.

A Pluralist Tradition

The Pakistani people have a deep culture of pluralist traditions dating back centuries that their founding leader sought to preserve in order to strengthen Pakistan as a nation-state while retaining the country's Muslim identity. In order to stabilize and develop the country, Pakistanis need to nurture this pluralist, tolerant tradition.

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