

The Jihadist Insurgency in Pakistan

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The increasing crisis of governance in Pakistan over the past several months has triggered many queries from Stratfor readers, most wanting to know how events will ultimately play out. Would a collapse of the Musharraf regime lead to a jihadist takeover? How safe are the country's nuclear weapons? What are the security implications for Afghanistan? Topmost among the questions is whether Pakistan will remain a viable state.

Globally, there are fears that the collapse of the current regime could lead to an implosion of the state itself, with grave repercussions on regional and international security. Pakistanis themselves are very much concerned about a disaster of national proportions, particularly if the [Feb. 18 elections](#) go awry.

Although there are conflicting theories on what will happen in and to Pakistan, most have one thing in common. They focus on the end result, seeing the unfolding events as moving in a straight line from Point A to Point B. They deem Point B — the collapse of Pakistan — to be an unavoidable outcome of the prevailing conditions in the country. Such predictions, however, do not account for the many arrestors and other variables that will influence the chain of events.

Though there are many, many reasons for concern in Pakistan, state breakdown is not one of them. Such an extreme outcome would require the fracturing of the military and/or the army's loss of control over the core of the country — neither of which is about to happen. That said, the periphery of the

country, especially the northwestern border regions, could become an increasing challenge to the writ of the state.

We have said on many occasions that Islamabad is unlikely to restore stability and security any time soon, largely because of structural issues. In other words, the existing situation is likely to persist for some time — and could even deteriorate further. This raises the question: How bad can things get?

The answer lies in the institutional cohesiveness of Pakistan's military establishment and the geographical structure of the country.

The Army

Stratfor recently pointed out that the army — rather than any particular military general — is the force that [holds the state together](#). Therefore, the collapse of the state would come about only if the military establishment were to fracture. For several reasons, this is extremely unlikely.

Pakistan's army is a highly disciplined organization made up of roughly half a million personnel. This force usually is led by at least two four-star generals — the chief of the army staff and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee. The leadership also consists of nine corps commanders and several other principal staff officers — all three-star generals. Beneath these approximately 30 lieutenant generals are about 150 two-star generals and some 450 one-star generals.

Moreover, and unlike in the Arab world, the Pakistani army has largely remained free of coups from within. The generals know their personal well-being is only as good as their collective ability to function as a unified and disciplined force — one that can guarantee the security of the state. The generals, particularly the top commanders, form a very cohesive body bound together by individual, corporate and national interests.

It is extremely rare for an ideologue, especially one with Islamist leanings, to make it into the senior ranks. In contrast with its Turkish counterpart, the Pakistani military sees itself as the protector of the state's Islamic identity, which leaves very little room for the officer corps to be attracted to radical Islamist prescriptions. Thus, it is extremely unlikely that jihadism — despite the presence of jihadist sympathizers within the junior and mid-level ranks — will cause fissures within the army.

In the absence of strong civilian institutions, the army also sees itself as the guardian of the republic. Because of the imbalance in civil-military relations — there is virtually no civilian oversight over the military — the army exercises nearly complete control over the nation's treasury. Having directly ruled Pakistan for some 33 years of the country's 60-year existence, the army has become a huge corporation with massive financial holdings.

While these interests are a reason for the army's historical opposition to democratic forces, they also play a major role in ensuring the cohesiveness of the institution. Consequently, there is no danger of the state collapsing. By extension, it is highly unlikely that the country's nuclear assets (which are under the control of the military through an elaborate multilayered institutional mechanism) would fall into the wrong hands.

Although a collapse of the state is unlikely, the military is having a hard time running the country. This is not simply because of political instability, which is hardwired into Pakistan's hybrid political system, but rather because of the unprecedented [jihadist insurgency](#).

While civilian forces (political parties, civil society groups, the media and the legal community) are pushing for democratic rule, jihadists are staging guerrilla-style attacks in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the rural Pashtun districts of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). Moreover, they are mounting a campaign of suicide bombings in major urban centers. The military does not have the bandwidth to deal with political unrest and militancy simultaneously — a situation that is being fully exploited by the jihadists. The likely outcome of this trend is the state's relative loss of control over the areas in the northwestern periphery.

Geography and Demography

From a strictly geopolitical point of view, Pakistan's core is the area around the Indus River, which runs from the Karakoram/Western Himalayan/Pamir/Hindu Kush mountain ranges in the North to the Arabian Sea in the South. Most areas of the provinces of Punjab and Sindh lie east of the Indus. The bulk of the population is in this area, as is the country's agricultural and industrial base — not to mention most of the transportation infrastructure. The fact that seven of the army's nine corps are stationed in the region (six of them in Punjab) speaks volumes about its status as the core of the country.



In contrast, the vast majority of the areas in the NWFP, FATA, Balochistan province, the Federally Administered Northern Areas and Pakistani-administered Kashmir are sparsely populated mountainous regions — and clearly the country's periphery. Moreover, their rough terrain has rendered them natural buffers, shielding the core of the country.

In our [2008 Annual Forecast](#) for South Asia, we said the country's Pashtun areas could become ungovernable this year, and there already are signs that the process is under way. Pakistani Taliban supported by al Qaeda have seized control of many parts of the FATA and are asserting themselves in the districts of NWFP adjacent to the tribal areas.

JIHADIST AREA OF OPERATIONS



While Islamism and jihadism can be found across the country, the bulk of this phenomenon is limited to the Pashtun areas — the tribal areas, the eastern districts of NWFP and the northwestern corridor of Balochistan province. Unlike the vast majority of Pakistanis, the Pashtuns are disproportionately an ultra-conservative lot (both religiously and culturally), and hence are disproportionately more susceptible to radical Islamist and jihadist impulses. It is quite telling that in the last elections, in 2002, this is roughly the same area in which the Islamist alliance, the Mutahiddah Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), won the bulk of its seats in the national legislature. In addition to maintaining a large parliamentary bloc, the

MMA ran the provincial government in NWFP and was the main partner with the pro-Musharraf Pakistan Muslim League in the coalition government in Balochistan.

Social structures and local culture, therefore, allow these areas to become the natural habitat of the Taliban and al Qaeda. Because of the local support base, the jihadists have been able not only to operate in these parts, but to take them over — and even to project themselves into the more settled areas of the NWFP. In addition to this advantage by default, security operations, which are viewed by many within the country as being done at the behest of the United States, have increasingly alienated the local population.

Given the local culture of retribution, the Pashtun militants have responded to civilian deaths during counterinsurgency operations by increasingly adopting suicide bombings as a means of fighting back. (It was not too long ago that the phenomenon of suicide bombings was alien to the local culture). The war in Afghanistan and its spillover effect on the border regions of Pakistan have created conditions in the area that have given al Qaeda and the Taliban a new lease on life.

Insurgency and Counterinsurgency

Resentment first toward Islamabad's pro-U.S. policies and then the security crackdown that began in early 2004 to root out foreign fighters has developed into a general uprising of sorts. A younger, far more militant [generation of Pashtuns](#) enamored of al Qaeda and the Taliban has usurped power from the old tribal maliks. Not only has the government failed to achieve its objective of driving a wedge between foreign fighters and their local hosts, it has strengthened the militants' hand.

One of the problems is the government's haphazard approach of alternating military operations with peace deals. Moreover, when the government has conducted security operations, it not only has failed to weaken the militancy, it has caused civilian casualties and/or forced local people to flee their homes, leading to a disruption of life. When peace agreements are made, they have not secured local cooperation against Taliban and al Qaeda elements. The lack of a coherent policy on how to deal with the jihadists has caused the ground situation to go from bad to worse. At the same time, on the external front, Islamabad has come under even more U.S. pressure to act against the militants, the effects of which further complicate matters on the ground.

On a tactical level, while the Pakistani army has a history of supporting insurgencies, it is ill-equipped to fight them. Even worse, despite the deployment of some 100,000 soldiers in the region, the bulk of security operations have involved paramilitary forces such as the Frontier Corps, which is mostly made up of locals who have little incentive to fight their brethren. Furthermore, Pakistan's intelligence capabilities already are [compromised](#) because of militant penetration of the agencies.

In addition to these structural problems, the [Musharraf government's](#) battle for political survival over the past year has further prevented the government from focusing on the jihadist problem. The only time it acted with any semblance of resolve is when it sent the army to regain control of the [Red Mosque](#) in the summer of 2007. However, that action was tantamount to pouring more fuel on the militant fire.

President Pervez Musharraf, by stepping down as army chief and becoming a civilian president, did not resolve his survival issues. In fact, it has led to a bifurcation of power, with Musharraf sharing authority with his successor in the military [Gen. Ashfaq Kayani](#). While Musharraf remains preoccupied with making it through the coming election, Kayani is increasingly taking charge of the fight against jihadism. The [assassination](#) of opposition leader Benazir Bhutto further complicated the regime's struggle to remain in power, leaving very little bandwidth for dealing with the jihadists.

What Lies Ahead

With the army's successful retaking of the district of [Swat](#) from militants loyal to Mullah Fazlullah, Kayani has demonstrated his abilities as a military leader. Despite this tactical victory, however, the situation is far from stable. From a strategic point of view, Kayani's plans to deal with the insurgency depend heavily on the outcome of the Feb. 18 elections (if indeed they are held). The hope is that the political turmoil can be brought back within acceptable parameters so the army can focus on fighting jihadists.

That would be an ideal situation for the army, because the prevailing view is that the military needs public support in order to be successful in combating religious extremism and terrorism. Such public support can only be secured when an elected government comprising the various political stakeholders is in charge. The assumption is that the policies of such a government would be easier to implement and that if the army has to use a combination of force and negotiations with the militants, it will have the public's backing instead of criticism.

But the problem is that there is an utter lack of national consensus on what needs to be done to defeat the forces of jihadism, beyond the simplistic view that the emphasis should be on dialogue and force should be used sparingly. Most people believe the situation has deteriorated because the Musharraf regime was more concerned with meeting U.S. demands than with finding solutions that took into consideration the realities on the ground. Islamabad knows it cannot avoid the use of force in dealing with the militants, but because of public opposition to such action, it fears that doing so could make the situation even worse.

Moreover, regardless of the election outcome (assuming the process is not derailed over cries of foul play), the prospects for a national policy on dealing with the Islamist militancy are slim. Circumstances

will require that the new government be a coalition — thus it will be inherently weak. This, along with the deteriorating ground reality, will leave the army with no choice but to adopt a tough approach — one it has been avoiding for the most part.

Having led the country's premier intelligence directorate, Inter-Services Intelligence, Kayani is all too aware of the need to overhaul the country's intelligence system and root out militant sympathizers. This is the principal way to reduce the jihadists' ability to stage attacks in the core areas of the country, where they have limited support structure. While this lengthy process continues, the army will try to contain the jihadist phenomenon on the western periphery along the border with Afghanistan.

The Pakistani government also needs to address the problems it has created for itself by distinguishing between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" Taliban. Islamabad continues to support the Taliban in Afghanistan while it is at war with the Pakistani Taliban. Given the strong ties between the two militant groups, Islamabad cannot hope to work with those on the other side of the border while it confronts those in its own territory.

Further complicating matters for Islamabad is the U.S. move to engage in [overt military action](#) on Pakistani soil in an effort to root out transnational jihadist elements. The Pakistanis need U.S. assistance in fighting the jihadist menace, but such assistance comes at a high political cost on the domestic front. The ambiguity in the Pakistani position could allow the Taliban and al Qaeda to thrive.

What this ultimately means is that the Pashtun areas could experience a long-term insurgency, resulting in some of these areas being placed under direct military rule. With the militants already trying to create their own "Islamic" emirate in the tribal areas, the insurgency has the potential to transform into a separatist struggle. Historically, the Pakistani army tried to defeat Pashtun ethnic nationalism by promoting Islamism — a policy that obviously has backfired miserably.

The Bottom Line

The good news for the Pakistanis — and others interested in maintaining the status quo — is that the ongoing jihadist insurgency and the political turmoil are unlikely to lead to the collapse of the state. The structure of the state and the nature of Pakistani society is such that radical Islamists, though a significant force, are unlikely to take over the country.

On the other hand, until the army successfully cleans up its intelligence system, suicide bombings are likely to continue across the country. Much more significant, the Pashtun areas along the Afghan border will be ungovernable. Pashtun jihadists and their transnational allies on both sides of the Durand Line will continue to provide mutual benefit until Pakistan and NATO can meaningfully coordinate their efforts.

Imposing a military solution is not an option for the Pakistanis or for the West. Negotiations with the Taliban in the short term are not a viable alternative either. Therefore, a long-term insurgency, which is confined to the Pashtun areas on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border, is perhaps the best outcome that can be expected at this time.