

Pakistan at 61: An Assessment of Challenges and Opportunities

Abubakar Siddique¹

Introduction

Sixty-one years after its independence in 1947, Pakistan still faces fundamental questions of identity, governance, state and nation-building. Despite being the only nuclear-armed Muslim country – raising Pakistan’s international political importance – more than one third of the Pakistani population still lives in extreme poverty. Despite a few years of impressive economic growth, bankrolled by the international community following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks against the US, Pakistan continues to experience an economic meltdown. This is coupled with the fact that almost half of Pakistan’s 165 million people (Pakistan is the sixth most populous country in the world) cannot read and write and even basic healthcare remain a distant dream for many in Pakistan’s tens of thousands of villages.

Strategically located at the crossroads of South and Central Asia, the Gulf and West Asia, Pakistan, since 9/11, is widely known as being the central front in the so-called ‘war on terror,’ and often finds itself in the news mostly for issues related to terrorism and other forms of violence often justified in the name of religion.

While nearly 1500 Pakistani soldiers have been killed in counter-terrorism operations over the past five years, Western states view Pakistan as the most likely hideout for senior members of al-Qaida’s leadership as the US-led coalition of the willing deal with a resurgent Taliban and al-Qaida insurgency in neighboring Afghanistan. Many Western analysts agree that Islamist militants (Pakistani, Afghan, Arabs and others) based in Pakistan are largely responsible for the situation in Afghanistan. These militants also pose a critical twenty-first century security challenge, one that affects the international community at large.

This work centers on Pakistan in the 21st century. It presents a historical-political account of Pakistan and identifies and assesses some of the more

¹ Abubakar Siddique is a Prague-based journalist for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, specialising in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He may be reached through CEJISS at: info@cejiss.org.

important changes that have occurred, and those which are currently underway in the self-perception, the international perception, the political structures and international relations of Pakistan. The assessment offered in this work is based on my professional coverage of Pakistan for the past decade.

New President, Old Problems

Asif Ali Zardari, co-chairman of Pakistan Peoples Party and widower of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, was elected Pakistan's president in an indirect election on September 6 2008. A former flamboyant businessman, once dubbed "Mr. Ten Percent" by the Pakistani media, Zardari has a long journey ahead to improve his image as a national leader who can deliver under tremendous pressure.² He faces an uphill climb as the media, and public opinion (particularly among the urban elites), are already stacked against him.

The 1973 constitution envisioned Pakistan as a British-style parliamentary democracy with the prime minister as the head of the executive and the president a symbolic figurehead. But former General Pervez Musharraf, through a pliant parliament, granted himself enormous extra authority. Besides the powers to appoint senior civilian and military leaders, the president also can dissolve the parliament and has control over the country's nuclear weapons.

Zardai has now inherited all these powers, but he has also inherited mammoth problems such as Pakistan's role as a front-line ally in the US-led war against terrorism. Unlike the war in the 1980s waged against the USSR – when Pakistan was the springboard for the war in Afghanistan – the country has now turned into the central front in the war on terror. With 25% inflation, a rapid decrease in foreign currency reserves, and chronic fuel and electricity shortages, former businessman Zardai is presiding over the economic meltdown of Pakistan. Though the country's powerful praetorian military is staying away from politics, the civilian coalition Zardai leads is fragile, and there are hardly any examples of successful coalition governments in Pakistan's history.

Zardai's foremost challenge will be to restore peace and stability in Pakistan. Over the past five years – following Pakistan's decision to become a key US ally in the war on terror – thousands of civilians, militants and soldiers have been killed in fighting between security forces and militants in Pakistan's western, Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA – a vast stretch of territory on Pakistan's western border with Afghanistan), and parts of the adjacent North Western Frontier Province (NWFP). Suicide attacks – once unheard of in the area – have now become almost daily occurrences. The NATO- and

² Though Zardari spent 11 years in prison over the past two decades on corruption charges, he was never convicted. Some reports suggest that he was convicted in one case but higher courts eventually overturned the conviction.

US-led coalition militaries are presently conducting ‘stepped-up’ cross border attacks against alleged Taliban and al-Qaeda targets inside Pakistan. Though these operations have been mostly conducted by unmanned drones and guided missiles, recently, NATO commandos carried out a raid inside Pakistan’s tribal areas near the Afghan border.

The war on terror will likely determine Zardai’s presidency. Coordinating a prudent strategy to tackle the web of associated problems will not be easy as Zardai juggles to placate a complex array of domestic and international actors. In Pakistan, the success of civilian governance depends on how compatible policies are with two main actors; the US and the Pakistani military establishment and to what degree they gain the confidence and support of both. Thus, Zardai has much tight-rope-walking ahead of him, and his success or failure may not even be determined by his actions, but rather by factors he bears little influence over.

Afghanistan, Tribal Areas and the ‘War on Terror’

The most critical challenge that Pakistan, under the leadership of Zardari, faces is geographically concentrated in the country’s western border region with Afghanistan; a challenge that maintains both regional and international dynamics. Since 1947, Pakistan has had hostile relations with both its eastern and western neighbors – India and Afghanistan. Following the 1979 Christmas Day Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Pakistan became a front-line state in Western efforts to challenge and ‘roll-back’ communism. This ‘front-line’ status was revived following 9/11 as the West, particularly the US, heavily relied on Pakistan to provide logistical support, unrestricted use of its airspace and Pakistani military actions in support of the conflict against Islamist extremism.

Although many in Western political establishments define the post-9/11 era under the broad category of the ‘war on terror,’ the manifestation of this conflict has actually unfolded under the rubric of Afghanistan-Pakistan relations on the ground. Over the past six decades, the bilateral relations between these two countries have been held hostage to larger regional and global alignments, pressures and interests. Elites and ruling establishments in the two neighboring countries harbor deep distrust towards each other. Pakistanis have seen the Afghan irredentist claims, and its support for Pashtun and Baluch ethno-nationalists movements as part of Soviet and Indian efforts to undermine its state. Also, Afghanistan and Pakistan have an enduring dispute over the exact place of their shared border, with Afghanistan never formally recognizing the Durand Line (with Pakistan) as an international frontier.

The Afghans accuse the Pakistani political establishment of attempting a colonization process in the guise of supporting Afghan and regional Islamist militant causes over the past three decades. Pakistan became the base camp

for anti-Soviet Afghan resistance after the Red Army invaded Afghanistan in 1979.³

More recently – particularly since 2002 – Afghanistan’s President Hamid Karzai has repeatedly criticized Pakistan for harbouring Taliban leadership while turning a blind eye to the safe-havens, recruitment, logistical support and cross-border operations by Taliban fighters. Karzai and his administration have alleged that without the Pakistani ‘rear bases,’ the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan would not last long. Pakistan denies such allegations and maintains that it is facing a worsening Taliban and al-Qaida insurgency on its soil, one that it would hardly encourage deliberately.

The discord between Kabul and Islamabad compelled the West to engage in diplomacy and their efforts led to a tribal council or Regional Peace *Jirga*, in 2007, which resulted in a joint declaration and also saw (then) President Musharraf admitting that the Taliban were in fact receiving support from within Pakistan, though he stopped short of admitting that such support came from within his security establishment.⁴ This *Jirga* temporarily improved bilateral relations and brought the two sides closer on a range of issues including, joint counter-terrorism efforts, economics, aid and reconstruction assistance.

Given the enormous and historic animosity and distrust between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the important international interests in this regional context, it seems that diplomatic overtures will be short-lived with major breakthroughs on key issues remaining illusive in the near future. Any likely resolution to the outstanding issues between Afghanistan and Pakistan must involve a comprehensive regional settlement with diplomatic, political and economic components and not merely address one issue at a time.

The most complicated piece in this jigsaw puzzle is in regards to Pakistan’s tribal areas. Covering some 27,000 square kilometers and abutting the Afghan border, many of the challenges facing FATA are rooted in centuries of history. For instance, to undermine the fierce Pashtun opposition to the British Indian Empire in the late 19th century, the British engineered an ingenious legal regime codified as: the Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR). This was meant as a legal toolbox in order to administer tribal regions through the imposition of harsh penalties against political and religious authorities seen as undermining British rule as well as more common criminals. Although the FCR intended to promote or increase local autonomy, the system also isolated the Pashtun border tribes.

The form of the FCR, which is currently employed, was implemented in 1901. In addition to providing enormous authority to a local administrator

³ For a detail study of the issue see Barnett Rubin and Abubakar Siddique, “Resolving the Afghanistan-Pakistan Stalemate,” United States Institute of Peace, October 2006.

⁴ Taimur Shah and Carlotta Gall, “Afghan Rebels Find Aid in Pakistan, Musharraf Admits.” New York Times (online edition), August 13 2007.

called the “political agent,” the FCR prevents local residents from participating in politics. It also established a system of collective responsibility, whereby an entire community is deemed responsible for the actions of an individual originating from that community. Over the six decades of Pakistani independence, Pakistani governments have done little to change the FCR, a tool of colonial order not reflective of the self-perception most ethnic Pashtuns living in FATA hold.

During his inaugural speech in March 2008, Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani announced that his government would abolish what he called the “obsolete” FCR. Gilani also promised to bring “economic, social, and political reforms” to the tribal areas, where illiteracy and poverty have created conditions for terrorism to spread. However, the government was soon distracted by internal political squabbling leading more to deadlock on the issue rather than the fulfillment of the broad and progressive initiative. Furthermore, international pressure, and the failure of peace agreements with the Taliban forced the government to launch fresh military operations against extremist fighters which has had the unintended affect of deepening the polarization of political life in the tribal areas and, in many cases, enhancing Taliban control, who often use brute force to intimidate and eliminate opponents among local opposition.

As the much-needed political reforms and intensive economic developmental plans are delayed in FATA, the situation there is likely to further deteriorate. For example, since many foreign Islamist militant leaders – and their followers – have made Pakistan’s tribal areas their military and political base has thrust this region to the center of a larger global struggle.

According to Afrasiab Khattak, a veteran Pashtun nationalist politician and peace envoy of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) government, Pakistan’s failure to eradicate militant sanctuaries from FATA not only has a spillover effect into many districts of the adjoining NWFP but it is also undermining regional and global security.

Khattak remarked that the

situation in our tribal areas is similar to that of pre-9/11 Afghanistan. State authority in those regions has nearly ended. Militants fighting in both Pakistan and Afghanistan now control this area, which threatens the whole region. We have repeatedly demanded a solution to this situation because we do not want these regions to turn into the battleground of a global conflict, as global powers respond to the threats emanating from these regions might be tempted to intervene [militarily].⁵

⁵ Abubakar Siddique, “Insecurity increases as Pakistani army fights pro-Taliban militants,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (www.rferl.org), August 4, 2008.

Since 9/11 the US has given Pakistan more than ten billion dollars in military aid and economic assistance mostly complementing its strategic objectives in the 'war on terror.' US officials and experts maintain that despite such generous US military and economic assistance, Pakistan has failed to deliver sufficiently on curbing extremism within its boundaries. In an important policy shift, the US congress has recently proposed to tie all Pakistan-bound military aid to its performance against al-Qaida and the Taliban while promising long-term development assistance to its civilian government.

Whether this policy shift remains an open question however Pakistan is likely to remain central to US strategy in the region and the country will be high on the agenda of the new US president as he takes office in January 2009.

Islam, Identity, the Military and Democracy

As events on the ground demonstrate, Islamist militants have embarked on a battle against Pakistani security forces. These are the latest in a long list of combatants competing for resources and ideological domination to the point that the rattle of gunfire in some ways define contemporary Pakistan. This was hardly the dream of Pakistan, when 61 years ago it was constructed as a modern secular state - home to the Muslims of South Asia but open to other religions and cultures as well. Its charismatic founder, the British-educated barrister, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, envisioned a progressive Muslim nation leading the Islamic world in broad conformity with global currents and trends in governance. However, six decades after independence, many still see Pakistan's course as undetermined and largely incomplete.

Instead of the initial hope for democracy, since 1947 there have been four military rulers who governed Pakistan for more than three decades, making periods of democratic rule the exception. Pervez Musharraf – who resigned his post on August 18 2008 – himself a former Commando General, ruled Pakistan for nearly nine years after assuming power in a bloodless military coup in 1999. He stood fourth in the line of military personalities to wrestle political power from civilian authorities. Musharraf was preceded by General Muhammad Ayub Khan, General Muhammad Yahya Khan and General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq who had ruled the country for extended periods in the 1960s and again in the 1980s. Musharraf's military government ended following the February 2008 parliamentary elections which resulted in the return of representative rule as a coalition government, of various political parties, pressured and replaced Musharraf's military regime. However it remains unclear whether these developments will transform Pakistan into a genuine democratic country or whether the military will continue to dominate Pakistan's political system.

One important factor directing Pakistan's future, particularly with concern to the future role of the military, is the Taliban operating in and from Pakistani territory. The Taliban are not only engaged in a widening insurgency in

Pakistan's western border regions, but a *Talibanization* – or the process of the spread of the radical Islamist ideology they espouse – has emerged as the most potent threat to Pakistani statehood and the way of life.

Pakistan – founded on the premise of distinct South Asian Muslim identity – adopted Islam as the country's identity and the main bond between its diverse peoples. Militant Islam, however, has emerged as one of the foremost challenges that Pakistan faces today.

Pakistan's "Permanent Establishment" in particular its military, has utilized political Islam for domestic political objectives and in pursuit of foreign policy agendas. The country was essentially a secular state until the 1970s. However, Pakistan's secular identity was transformed in the 1980s, when the (then) Pakistani military dictator, General Zia-ul-Haq, monopolized the anti-Soviet Afghan resistance and turned it into a religious holy war or *Jihad*. His regime backed and nurtured hard-line Islamist groups in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. In the 1990s *Jihad* was extended to mobilize fighters in the Indo-Pakistani conflict over the Himalayan region of Kashmir; a policy that has backfired since 9/11 and the initiation of the US-led 'war on terror.'

One important blowback of such policies is the rise in sectarian violence between extremist Shiite and Sunni militant factions. Some 20% of Pakistan's 165 million people are Shiite and the country borders on Iran – the only Shiite dominated Muslim country. The Shiite-Sunni conflict started in Pakistan in the mid-1980's and has since resulted in an estimated 5,000 deaths. Though the extremists are supported by Saudi Arabia and the Sunni Gulf states on the one hand, and revolutionary Shiite Iran on the other, innocent people are the most common victims of the violence unleashed by them.⁶ Over the past year, the Taliban have virtually besieged an estimated 500,000 Shiites in Parachinar town, in the Kurram tribal district along Pakistan's western border with Afghanistan.

As an ethnically diverse country, the use of religion as a common bond was not without reason. By deploying Islam – even in a secular way – many in Pakistan hoped to maintain political order and stability among the country's various ethnic groups. This *unity-through-Islam* approach to political life in Pakistan has not fared well. For instance, in 1971 Pakistan fragmented into two independent states with so-called East Pakistan transforming into Bangladesh while western Pakistan kept its namesake though in a greatly reduced territory. This split of Pakistan revealed its vulnerabilities by exposing the inability of Pakistan to adequately utilize Islam as the cement to maintain its territorial integrity. In short, the Pakistan-Islam connection was not enough of a source of identity to prevent a partial dissolution.

⁶ David Montero, "Shiite-Sunni Conflict Rises in Pakistan." Christian Science Monitor, February 2, 2007. Article available at: www.csmonitor.com.

The lessons of 1971 were not lost on other ethnic groups within Pakistan, as the calls for true democratization have been ringing louder since that time. Indeed, the lack of a true representative democracy in Pakistan has created enormous anger and frustration among minority ethnic groups in the smaller provinces throughout the country, which regard the Pakistani authorities as being out-of-sync with their demands, cultures and general identity.

One of the most pronounced calls for changes to the political status quo over the past few years comes from the resource-rich southwestern Baluchistan, which has been engulfed in a violent separatist Baluchi insurgency. The present insurgency is the fourth insurrection by the Baluch since the creation of an independent Pakistan. The insurgency is comprised of hard-line Baluch ethno-nationalists, and it is secular in character.

The Baluch might be the most vocal and, at present, the only militant ethno-nationalist movement in Pakistan, however ethnic tensions are festering in other parts of the country, and group grievances are increasingly expressed in ethno-nationalist causes championed by various political parties and movements. Ethno-nationalists of minority ethnic groups such as, the Baluchis, Pashtuns and Sindhis have long resented the dominant Punjabis who are concentrated in the eastern Punjab province but dominate the Pakistani state bureaucracy and its military. This resentment is amplified if one considers that resource distribution occurs on the basis of population size. Since the Punjabis comprise the largest ethnic group in Pakistan also entitles them to a lion share of national resources including, importantly, high-level employment opportunities.

Examples of ethnic tensions and flares of ethnic-inspired political violence are numerous. Pakistan's southern commercial port city of Karachi – the country's largest urban center with a population of roughly 12 million – is often the scene of ethnic conflicts and tensions. In Karachi and the surrounding Sindh province, tensions between Sindhis and Mohajirs – the Urdu speaking community who migrated from India at the time of partition in 1947 – are frequent. Karachi also has the largest urban concentration of Pashtuns and there is a history of tensions between Pashtuns and Mohajirs. In the future, the mega-polis has the potential to become another Hong Kong or Beirut, depending on the model Pakistan follows and how successful such a model is.

In Pakistan, as in other countries, ethnic strains tend to be fed by internal and international events. Particularly Pakistani tensions have been nurtured by several regional and international events including the 9/11 attacks and subsequent US-led regime change in Afghanistan, which forced the relocation of many Taliban officials and fighters to Pakistan's tribal areas. This has, in turn, further deepened ethnic tensions. For example, as a reaction to the rising tide of *Talibanization* in Pakistan's western Pashtun regions along with the border, secular and non-violent Pashtun nationalism has reasserted itself. Awami National Party, a major Pashtun nationalist party won a majority of seats in the North West Frontier Province in the February 2008 elections.

But what is the solution to such an array of complex and interrelated socio-political and economic problems? Many assert that democratization – that is the prolonged return to civilian rule – is the only hope to remedy Pakistan’s current situation. Such an approach, while correct, must be conceived as a long-term project. As the case in neighboring Afghanistan has illustrated, the road to democracy is often bloody and the two neighbours are so interrelated that the success – or failure – of democracy in one country is bound to affect the other. As Pakistan faces a deteriorating security situation it is hard to imagine that a rapid change in political representation could act as an appropriate remedy. Instead, Pakistan and the rest of the international community should hunker down for a long and sustained political process with an uninterrupted period of representative rule. This seems like the only way to keep ethnic tensions at bay and foster an environment where ethnic groups may vent their frustrations in chambers of politics instead of on streets and through violence.

While the above discussion detailed some of the internal challenges currently facing Pakistan, this work would be irresponsibly incomplete if it omitted an account of Pakistan’s enduring rivalry with neighboring India over the status of Kashmir. Therefore, the next section introduces the Indo-Pakistani conflict and seeks to explain it in a regional and international context.

India and Kashmir

Despite the centrality of the post-9/11 ‘war on terrorism’ and the current security concerns in the tribal regions bordering Afghanistan, India has always been Pakistan’s main worry. The 1947 partition of India into two states – Pakistan and India – both solved and created a range of problems from ethno-religious to territorial. Real and tangible peace has yet to be achieved between these two states who have waged three wars over the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir, and continue to spend considerable portions of their national wealth and political energies on advancing their particular goals over the future of Kashmir.

Pakistan views India – a country many times bigger in population, size and significantly more resourceful – as its major national security threat and over the past six-decades nearly all of its internal and external policies have been centered on the perception of such a threat. The relative success of the Indo-Pakistani peace process since 2004 has raised hopes that the two sides have moved towards a *modus vivendi*. Though bombing attacks inside India, at times, temporarily halts the peace process, a *détente* has been established between the two neighbors for the past three years as they inch along on dealing with the fundamental issues including the final status of Kashmir. Major future terrorist attacks inside India, however, can derail the peace process and can even revive the prospects of an all-out war between the two neighbors. In recent years, domestic challenges have overtaken Pakistan’s obsession with

Kashmir. Since 2001 Pakistan has been gradually backtracking from supporting separatist and Islamist militancy in Kashmir because of its blowback effects at home and under mounting international pressure. This has been reciprocated by Kashmiri separatists who, during recent mass demonstrations also indicated a willingness to abandon paramilitary solutions in favor of non-violent means to obtain their goals.

While the Kashmir issue will not solve itself and requires the active participation of India in its resolution, it is clear that Pakistan has made an important compromise; to abandon its militaristic approach in favor of dialogue and negotiations with India. This is a step in the right direction as it indicates growing political responsibility among decision makers – in two of the world’s newest nuclear powers – to prevent a return to open hostilities.

Looking Ahead

As this work demonstrated, Pakistan is a country of contrasts. While Western news sources almost exclusively focus on violence, militancy and extremism, Pakistani civil society is vibrant and is now reasserting itself. For example, several times over the past 12 months black-suited lawyers across Pakistan protested for the rule of law, democracy and increased independence of the judiciary. At the same time the Pakistani press deserves credit for continuing to publish stories and report on a variety of sensitive issues thus fighting for and largely retaining its freedom. Indeed, the Pakistani press is well regarded for its diversity and activism throughout the region.

The emergence and assertion of a vibrant civil society, the spirit of the business community and the moderation of a very large segment of the Pakistani population are key assets that Pakistan can utilize in establishing a vibrant democracy with stable civil and military relations. This may, in turn, provide Pakistan with additional international leverage and add to constructing an environment conducive to negotiated settlements with its neighbors and the international community at large over the variety of issues currently impeding Pakistani development. For instance, Pakistan will need to reach a final political settlement with India for its ultimate survival. It is unrealistic to believe that India and Pakistan can duel eternally. Instead, just as mutually assured destruction (MAD) underpins the logic of deterrence, a concept of mutually assured survival must begin to take shape where both India and Pakistan recognize that their survival depends on each other. At the time of this writing both states have begun to take baby-steps in this direction, and it is a matter of great international importance that they are supported in such endeavours. International powers have to play a major balancing role in promoting such an understanding. Pakistanis are angry at what they see as being treated as a nuclear pariah because of its alleged past involvement in nuclear proliferation. This year the U.S. concluded a lucrative nuclear deal with India – thereby

lending credence to its claims as a legitimate nuclear power. But no such deal was ever offered to Pakistan. Finally, tackling Islamic extremism and making peace with Afghanistan and transforming the Pashtun border region would also improve Pakistan's future prospects and demonstrate to the world that it is emerging as a responsible state whose self-image reflects the image the world maintains of it.

In the long-term, Pakistan will also have to engage in human development to follow the economic development models of its Asian neighbors to its east. This implies that a larger part of its GDP should be spent on the welfare of its 165 million people instead of the financially draining military.

Pakistan's past sixty-one years have been tumultuous, but the people of Pakistan have shown their resilience and have survived against heavy odds. Its next sixty years will depend on geopolitics in one of the world's most volatile regions. Most significantly, Pakistani elite has yet to agree on a unified future vision and work hard to achieve it. Again this implies the active support of the international community, which must recognize that for the sake of international peace, prosperity and stability, Pakistan must be engaged with and not isolated. Its democratic process needs to be bolstered from the inside and the outside to prevent the return of military rule or the success of the process of Talibanization. Given these three options, democratization is clearly the optimal result and just as Pakistan is increasingly called on to act responsibly so to must other states responsibly act towards Pakistan.