

1, 2, 3...Coup! Of Violence, Incursions on Sovereignty and Recourses in Pakistan

By Irm Haleem

Pakistan is no stranger to military coups, as apparent from its experience in 1958, 1977 and then again in 1999 (the first two leading to military rule spanning a decade or more). The recent volatile combination of events within Pakistan has, I argue, once again brought Pakistan to the brink of military coup. Area experts such as Ayesha Jalal disagree with the likelihood of this scenario, arguing that the Pakistani military would rather leave the civilians in charge so as to leave them with the political responsibility of the consequences of their military actions in the north of Pakistan.[1] In this article, however, I argue instead that a coup is very likely impending in Pakistan. I base this assessment on the following events that seem to create a textbook formula for a military coup: the continued unauthorized US military incursions into Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) violating Pakistani sovereignty; the continued alienation of tribal populations in FATA from both the Pakistani military and civilian establishments as well as from the Americans; the unexpectedly aggressive and well organized battle that is on-going between the Pakistani army and the radicalized elements in FATA's Bajaur agency; the increasing incidences of terrorism in Pakistan and then in the country's capital no less; and the embarrassing remarks made by the new Pakistani President Asif Zardari in his recent visit to the US indicating at best his autocratic mentality and at worst his potential incompetence in leading a nuclear state. These events together may very well increase the likelihood of a military coup. A coup in such circumstance would of course be a measure of last resort to restore stability within Pakistan.

But how might one understand the abstract notion of 'restoring stability'? I argue that while a coup would not necessarily stop US incursions, nor even eliminate the extremist threat facing the Pakistani government, it might delegitimize US claims that Pakistan is not doing enough to fight terrorism within its borders and, as a result, it might lead to an alteration in the explicit nature of US interventions into Pakistani territory. This might, in turn, reduce the terrorist threat facing the Pakistani government since it would reduce the negative perceptions on the part of the extremists who view the Pakistani government as not standing up to the Americans and as, worse, tacitly approving such American incursions resulting in the deaths of their own people. The outcome of a military coup might therefore be a stabilizing of the current chaos as well as a flexing of the Pakistani military and political muscles vis-à-vis their American counterparts, a posturing so critical to the maintenance of Pakistan's regional balance of power and its international reputation.

Let us pause here and address the nature of instability in Pakistan. According to the US National Counter-Terrorism Center's annual report, incidences of terrorism on Pakistani soil have increased by 137% from 2006-2007 "with 1,335 terrorism-related fatalities [,] placing the country third in the world on such a scale...after Iraq and Afghanistan." [2] And, as the Wall Street Journal noted, "in a further sign of Pakistan's deteriorating security situation, gunmen kidnapped Afghanistan's ambassador-designate to the country and killed his driver in the main northwestern city of Peshawar [a city historically known for its secure environment]". [3] Acts of terrorism on Pakistani soil are nothing new, but while in the 1980s and 1990s these acts were rooted in sectarian hatreds of the intrastate variety, acts of terrorism in the post-2001 era have increasingly been rooted in the transnational variety of the multi-front war (anti-US and anti-Pakistani government) fought on Pakistani soil by disgruntled members of the erstwhile Taliban that fled Afghanistan into neighboring Pakistan after the US bombing of terrorist bases in Afghanistan in 2001. Not surprisingly, the epicenter of this new wave of terrorism is located in this most remote and most rural of all Pakistani territory, the so-called Federal Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

FATA directly borders Afghanistan and is comprised of seven agencies including Bajaur and North and South Waziristan. One significance of FATA is that these areas have historically been autonomous and only nominally controlled by the Pakistani central government (and that might be too generous a statement) if only because of logistical difficulties given a sparse population spread over very steep mountainous terrain. As such, federal constitutional laws are not recognized, much less upheld, but instead it is the tribal laws that are upheld as legitimate and which govern matters. This is not to say that tribal laws equal terrorism. It should be noted that increasingly tribal elders in many of the provinces in the FATA areas are now holding town meetings against the radical justifications of violence and terrorism.[4] My point here is simply that Pakistani federal laws do not have any legitimacy in the tribal areas, thereby making tribal areas beyond the effective jurisdiction of the central government in Pakistan.

The other significance of FATA is that it is ethnically Pakhtun, the same ethnic group that comprised the erstwhile Taliban government of Afghanistan. Prior to the Pakistani government's U-turn vis-à-vis the Afghani Taliban after September 2001, the leaderships of FATA had friendly relations with the central government in Pakistan. Relations became strained thereafter due to what was perceived as the betrayal of their ethnic brethren by the Pakistani government which contributed to the radicalization of the local tribal populations, a fact that was only catalyzed by the post-2001 influx of the al-Qaeda inspired Taliban remnants from neighboring Afghanistan. The result was (and is) the fostering of both an anti-American as well as an anti-Pakistani government stand in much of the FATA.

That the remote tribal areas of FATA have become a springboard for violence and destruction within Pakistan proper is not in dispute.[5] A most recent example of this is the bombing of the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad, Pakistan, on September 20, 2008, where over 40 people were killed and over 150 injured in the worst terrorist attack in the heart of Pakistan's capital. The "bomb contained an estimated 600 kgs of military-grade explosives as well as artillery and mortar shells [that]...left a crater 60 feet wide and 24 feet deep." [6] Most significantly, the attack is thought to have been the retaliation of the militants that are fighting a full scale war with the Pakistani army in Bajaur (in the FATA) since August 2008.[7] It is thought that "after Waziristan [that has become the headquarters of the new Taliban movement of Pakistan], Bajaur is perhaps the most significant stronghold of militants from the Taliban and al-Qaeda who have entrenched themselves in the tribal areas". [8] Perhaps the most alarming aspect of this—other than the fact that the militants now seem to be taking the war to the heart of the Pakistani population—is that the militants are better equipped and better coordinated than before. An unnamed Pakistan military official notes that the Pakistani army in Bajaur is not fighting a "ragtag militia" but a most organized force with "mind-boggling" tactics.[9] An even more disturbing fact is brought to light by Pakistan's Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani who speculated that the target of the extremists was not initially the Marriot Hotel but the Pakistani "parliament or the prime minister's residence nearby" and that it was only after failing access to those preferred targets that the easier target of the Marriot Hotel was chosen.[10] This view holds particular credibility given the fact that the "attack came hours after new President Asif Ali Zardari...delivered his first address to parliament [a building] which is just a few hundred meters away", which at the very least is an interesting coincidence and at the very most an intended anti-Pakistani establishment gesture on the part of the extremists.[11]

So what of the violations of Pakistan's sovereignty by American military incursion into the FATA of Pakistan that I argued earlier might likely contribute to a military coup in Pakistan? Pakistan's President Zardari recently asserted that "national sovereignty would get precedence over everything else". [12] This implies that no threats to Pakistani national sovereignty will be tolerated. But while this may seem straight forward to most audiences (both within and without Pakistan), less obvious are the different manifestations of the threats to sovereignty. These different manifestations take the form, I argue, not only of the different understandings of the meaning of 'sovereignty' but also the different elements that can conceivably threaten state sovereignty. In other words, the sovereignty of a state

may be threatened not only by military incursions by another state into the sovereign territory of that state but also by the persistent violence induced by entities from within that state. So, in the case of the national sovereignty of Pakistan, it is not only the recent United States military drones which have been flying into the FATA region of Pakistan without the consent of the Pakistani government and Pakistani Army that are a violation of Pakistani sovereignty, but it is also the Taliban-inspired extremism originating in the FATA region of Pakistan itself that is threatening Pakistan's national sovereignty.

Let us address first the different understandings of the meaning of sovereignty in light of the American extra-legal military incursions into Pakistani territory. Stephen Krasner distinguishes between two kinds of state sovereignty: (1) legal sovereignty and (2) Westphalian sovereignty.[13] The former comprises the granting of legal recognition to any state entity that is assessed by the international community of states (often in the United Nations forum) as both politically and socially feasible to stand and operate as an independent entity.[14] The latter form of sovereignty comprises a rather idealistic notion of the inviolability of absolute independence of any state from any outside incursions in its internal affairs by other states. Krasner argues that in the reality of international affairs, determined as they are by the political likes and dislikes of the powerful states and by the realities of interdependence, it is the notion of legal sovereignty that is propelled by the global hegemon as the 'meaning' of sovereignty, a meaning that can scarcely be violated no matter what intrusive actions powerful states might take against less powerful states in pursuit of their national interests. Such incursions can of course take the form either of coercive military actions (as in the case of the recent American military incursions into the FATA region of Pakistan) or the less physically coercive forms of multinational or unilateral economic sanctions and embargos imposed on a state or, further still, they might take the form of least coercive multinational humanitarian or economic agreements. But whatever form such incursions take, they necessarily violate the notion of Westphalian sovereignty as they force (coercively or less coercively) the state in question to alter its policies hence interfering with its domestic (and foreign) affairs.

Let us now address what I have termed as the different manifestations of the violations of state sovereignty. Even if, as Krasner argues, international realities (in the *realpolitik* sense) are no longer conducive to the categorical observation of a Westphalian sovereignty, this does not take away from the fact that intrusions into the domestic affairs of a state by other states, particularly when they are in the form of coercive military actions without the consent of the host government, are violations of the state sovereignty of the host government. One manifestation of the violations of sovereignty comes from entities outside the host state in question. And it is thus that such American military actions into the FATA of Pakistan are perceived by both the layperson, the journalists, government and military officials as well as, of course, the extremists in Pakistan. In other words, theoretical and *realpolitik* debates aside, it is the perceptions on the ground that determines reactions in any state and under any scenario. In the case of Pakistan, as one would expect from being even vaguely familiar with the academic studies of the causes of terrorism, negative perceptions such as the American violation of Pakistani sovereignty are only fueling further the Islamist extremist reaction against both the Americans and also the Pakistani government which, as I noted earlier, has come to be perceived by the Taliban-inspired extremists as at best too weak to contend with the Americans and at worst as the puppets of the American 'War on Terrorism' that is now turning a blind eye to the killings of its own people.

This brings us to the other manifestation of the violations of sovereignty, namely the violation of state sovereignty that comes from threats from within the state entity in question. Terrorism based within the boundaries of a state threatens that state's sovereignty because such acts of violence—particularly as frequently as they have been occurring in Pakistan in the last few years—take away the government's control over its territory. The right of sovereignty is after all the right of controlling the territory within one's state. It is precisely this lack of control that is feared from the perceived 'Talibanization' of Pakistan, a fear that has been on the minds not only of Pakistani journalists and

political columnists for some time now but now also openly on the minds of the Pakistani military establishment as well.

But are the negative perceptions of radical Islamists in Pakistan a reason enough for the Pakistani military to stage a coup and suspend the newly elected democratic government in Pakistan? Clearly not, particularly since such a military action on the part of the Pakistani government might further fuel the anti-Pakistani government stand that the extremists in Pakistan have already embraced. However, when the highly qualified and highly respected Pakistani defense analysts start painting alarming scenarios regarding the larger intention of American military operations in the FATA region of Pakistan then indeed there is cause to consider the possibility of a all out coup d'état in Pakistan and the complete (if temporary) suspension of democratic structures and 'business as usual'. Dr. Shireen Mazari, one of Pakistan's most prominent defense analysts, argued caution against a passive Pakistani acceptance of all and any American actions simply because they are under the guise of the 'war on terrorism' when she noted the following:

The big picture for Pakistan should be more visible now in terms of what the US agenda is for this country...Some of us have been highlighting that agenda for some years [since the post-2001 institution of the American war on terrorism]...and also pointing out how complicity of our leadership was a requirement for that agenda to continue moving ahead. What is that agenda? Clearly, it involves the US creating space within the tribal areas to move in militarily and eventually restructure the whole Muslim nuclear entity of Pakistan.[15]

Leaving aside the credibility of such an assessment, what is important is the implicit (and perhaps not so implicit) accusation Dr. Mazari levies against the Pakistani civilian government itself. This accusation amounts to an assessment of the political incompetence of the Pakistani government in terms of both its inability to secure its borders from outside incursions (namely American military incursions) and also therefore, by extension, its inability to effectively address its growing Islamist extremist opposition at home which, argues Mazari, is only strengthened by the continued American military operations in the FATA and the continued impotency of the Pakistani government against American pressures. Of course, in her condemnation of the Pakistan civilian government she includes a condemnation of the former President of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf, who came under the 'civilian government' umbrella after he resigned his military post as Army Chief in November 2007.

More critically still, the Pakistani defense analyst's assessments are even more uncomplimentary regarding Pakistan's new President Asif Ali Zardari. Pakistan's defense analyst Mazari condemns President Zardari for making remarks in his interview with the Wall Street Journal during his September 2008 visit to the United States that, in her opinion, not only reflected his intrinsic autocratic nature but also his political and economic greed, a depiction which she argues embarrasses Pakistan as it once again depicts it as having politically inept leadership. Some of the most embarrassing remarks according to Mazari were ones where President Zardari talks of "Pakistan and its institutions as his personal fiefdom" as apparent from remarks such as "my F-16s", "my security personnel" (referring apparently to the Pakistani military) and of course his remark that "he wants the world to 'give me' \$100 billion!"[16]

If American military incursions into Pakistan's FATA region continue, and if Pakistan's defense analysts continue to view such incursions as gross violations of Pakistani sovereignty in addition to viewing its current civilian leadership as contributing to this volatile situation and, further still, come to conclude that both the American military incursions as well as the Pakistani government's tacit acceptance of such incursions are only fueling more domestic extremism in Pakistan so that "if the present trends continue we may well eventually confront a civil war across the country" then my assessment of the impending military coup in Pakistan seem suddenly very viable.[17] Theories of civil-military relations point to a direct relationship between the imperative of government coercion for the maintenance of law and order and the likelihood of military coups.[18] So as law and order in

a country deteriorates the military's perception of the necessity of a coup increases. This is not surprising since the military institution of any country is by definition known for its propensity toward coercive and draconian measures which, at a time of violence and instability, appear at once necessary and thus acceptable. Theoretically speaking, the political and social stability of any state may be disrupted due either to a corrupt and inept civilian governance leading subsequently to civilian-military estrangement, a garrison state mentality brought upon either by historically perceived threat of conventional war with neighboring states or the existence of sharp and contentious ethnic divides prone to violent outbursts.[19] In the case of Pakistan, sharp ethnic divides led to the partial fragmentation of the country and the subsequent creation of the new sovereign state of Bangladesh in 1971. But this is not where the story ends. In an article that appeared in *Third World Quarterly* in 2004 I had argued that in the case of Pakistan it is not only the existence of sharp ethnic (linguistic) divides that most effectively explains the Pakistani military interventions in governance but, even more critically, it is the existence of hate-ridden sectarian divides (Shia-Sunni divides).[20] However, if the violence unleashed by the ethnic and sectarian divides has increased the likelihood of military coups in Pakistan in the past, then the current mushrooming of Jihadi Taliban and Al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism on Pakistani soil will only multiply this effect.

So given the current situation in Pakistan as comprising violations of Pakistani sovereignty both from within (in the form of Islamist extremists in the FATA) and without (in the form of American extra-legal military incursions into Pakistan's FATA), a military coup would likely take place, I argue, because of the gravitational force with which Pakistan is being pulled into a garrison state mentality. Add to that an increasing perception on the part of some of the political and military analysts in Pakistan of the political impotence of the new civilian governance in Pakistan and we have the classic formula for a coup d'état. Thus, recent developments in Pakistan only contribute to the efficacy of coercion in governance, a fact that the military may use to legitimize a coup.

If, in light of the above combinations of events, the Pakistani military offers justifications for a coup, these may rest on the following assumptions. First, that the imposition of strict marital law would stifle the ease with which extremists have been operating and moving within Pakistan and thereby give a powerful message to the extremists that the government of Pakistan is not in any mood to play victim. Second, a coup might restore the domestic and international image of the Pakistani military establishment, an image that has been bruised with the tenacity with which terrorism continues in Pakistan and with the unending protracted war that the Pakistani military has been engaged in some of the areas of its FATA and, of course, with the continued unauthorized American military operations in that area. Third, a coup might help restore American confidence that Pakistan is indeed serious about fighting terrorism, a faith that the American administration has made quite obvious is ailing.[21] And if a coup in Pakistan does not halt the unauthorized American military operations within Pakistani territory (given the assumptions that hegemony will pursue their national interests above and beyond any other considerations), it might encourage it to make such operations more implicit, such as with the use of special forces as opposed to the more obvious military instruments. This of course would very well have the added benefit of decreasing the negative perceptions that the radical Islamist groups have regarding the United States and, by extension, reduce its targets within Pakistani cities. The net result of a coup may then be presented as the likelihood of reduction in incidences of terrorism within Pakistan.

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NOTES:

[1] Informal correspondence with Dr. Ayesha Jalal, Mary Richardson Professor of History, Tufts University, Medford, Massachusetts, October 20, 2008.

[2] Anwar Iqbal, "War against terror tops agenda of Bush-Zardari meeting", in *Dawn* (Karachi, Pakistan) newspaper internet edition (<http://DAWN.com>), Saturday, September 20, 2008.

[3] Associated Press. "Pakistan Leaders Were to Meet at Hotel, Officials Says", in *The Wall Street Journal*, Tuesday, September 23, 2008,

A23.

- [4] "Tribal elders in Pakistan district assemble 20,000-strong force to fight Taliban militants", Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), special dispatch no. 2058, September 22, 2008. <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=archives&Area=sd&ID=SP205808>
- [5] This fact does not negate the recent efforts made by tribal elders of the NWFP to form peace committees against violence and terrorism. See Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) special dispatch no. 2058, September 22, 2008, entitled "Tribal Elders in Pakistani District Assemble 20,000 Strong Force to Fight Taliban".
- [6] Syed Irfan Raza, "Waziristan link seen in attack on Marriott: Blast caused by RDX and TNT: Malik", in Dawn newspaper (Karachi, Pakistan), internet edition, Monday, September 22, 2008.
- [7] Ismail Khan & Carlotta Gall, "Battle of Bajaur: A Critical Test for Pakistan's Daunted Military", in The New York Times, Tuesday, September 23, 2008, A12.
- [8] Ismail Khan & Carlotta Gall, "Battle of Bajaur: A Critical Test for Pakistan's Daunted Military", in The New York Times, Tuesday, September 23, 2008, A12.
- [9] Ismail Khan & Carlotta Gall, "Battle of Bajaur: A Critical Test for Pakistan's Daunted Military", in The New York Times, Tuesday, September 23, 2008, A12.
- [10] Associated Press, "Pakistan's Leaders Were to Meet at Hotel, Officials Say", The Wall Street Journal, Tuesday, September 23, 2008, A23.
- [11] "Suicide attack kills dozens in the heart of Islamabad", in Dawn newspaper (Karachi, Pakistan), internet edition, Sunday, September 21, 2008.
- [12] Staff reporter, "Air strikes carried out on flawed intelligence", in Dawn newspaper (Karachi, Pakistan), internet edition, Saturday, September 20, 2008. Emphases have been added here.
- [13] See Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
- [14] This means of course that the withholding (by all or some of the members of the international community) of legal recognition for any given state becomes a symbolic gesture akin to a political sanction. The discussion of this matter is however beyond the scope of this article.
- [15] Shireen M. Mazari, "Unwilling to shake off America's grip?" in International, The News (Pakistan), Opinion section, Wednesday, October 8, 2008. http://www.thenews.com.pk/editorial_detail.asp?id=139855
- [16] Shireen M. Mazari, "Unwilling to shake off America's grip?" in International, The News (Pakistan), Opinion section, Wednesday, October 8, 2008. http://www.thenews.com.pk/editorial_detail.asp?id=139855
- [17] For Mazari's comments in quotes here, see Shireen M. Mazari, "Unwilling to shake off America's grip?" in International, The News (Pakistan), Opinion section, Wednesday, October 8, 2008. http://www.thenews.com.pk/editorial_detail.asp?id=139855
- [18] Other factors that have been hypothesized as encouraging military coups are (1) the extent of military professionalism, (2) the existence of a garrison state, (3) the expansion of the military's role in the socioeconomic realms of a state, (4) political underdevelopment, (5) corrupt and inept civilian leaderships, (6) economic underdevelopment and (7) the colonial legacy of favoring military-bureaucratic power structures that have increased the propensity of praetorianism in post-colonial eras. For a detailed analysis of these theories see *Coercion and Governance: The declining political role of the military in Asia*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Sanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001).
- [19] Given the scope of this article I have excluded other variables of military coups, such as structural legacies of colonial rule and a lack of military professionalism (which in traditional wisdom of the studies of this phenomenon is understood as the tendency or tradition of the military to intervene in political matters of the state that are usually largely beyond the constitutional jurisdiction of military institutions in most states, including Pakistan). For an excellent survey of these factors in the context of Asian states see Muthiah Alagappa, "Investigating and Explaining Change: An analytical framework", in *Coercion and Governance: The declining political role of the military in Asia*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Sanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001).
- [20] I shall not here elaborate in detail the nature of both the ethnic or sectarian divides nor the dynamic of civil military relations that I have argued have encouraged praetorianism in Pakistan since the details of this argument have already been published in my article entitled "Ethnic and sectarian violence and the propensity toward praetorianism in Pakistan", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2003, pp. 463-477.
- [21] Anwar Iqbal, "US leaders urge Pakistan to intensify war on terror" in Dawn newspaper (Karachi, Pakistan), internet edition, Monday, September 22, 2008. See also Ismail Khan & Carlotta Gall, "Battle of Bajaur: A Critical Test for Pakistan's Daunted Military", in The New York Times, Tuesday, September 23, 2008, A12.