Creating Frankensteins:
The Taliban Movement of Pakistan

By Irm Haleem

Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* has been most popularly interpreted as a lesson in the unintended consequences of actions. It is not surprising therefore that Shelly's Frankenstein finds its way into the vocabulary of political scientists describing volatile situations in terms of 'creating Frankensteins one could not control'. In the novel, the monstrosity that comes to be known as 'Frankenstein' is the creation of Victor Frankenstein the doctor, a product of his promethean dreams of demonstrating his *control* over his natural environment and thus, his mastery in science and by extension his legitimacy as a scientist. The unintended consequences of Victor's experiment become of course an entity (Frankenstein the monster) that comes not only to challenge Victor's assumptions of control, but also comes to destroy all that Victor holds dear. At a critical juncture, not even appeasement suffices as the monster attains a gravitational force that ultimately destroys all.

But let us move away from the novel and into the political landscape of Pakistan. Subsequent governments in Pakistan—both civilian democratic, as well as military dictatorial—have had promethean dreams of their own. These have included a desire to be in control of the political and social environment of the country by taking an assortment of actions to broaden their constituencies in order to bolster their legitimacy. General Zia ul-Haq (1977-88), for example, instituted the 'Islamization' of Pakistan to bolster both his domestic and international legitimacy. Domestically he catered to the growing Sunni Islamic revivalist movement (to be distinguished from Islamist extremist movements) to the detriment of the Shia minority. At the same time, he presented himself to the international community as the vanguard against Soviet communist expansionism, much to the satisfaction of the Americans. The unintended consequences of this policy were the mushrooming of anti-Shia Sunni extremist groups and their counter anti-Sunni Shia extremist groups.

Within the context of these growing sectarian extremist entities, the late Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto pursued classic divide-and-rule policies during both her aborted tenures in the 1990s. During this period, she courted the most extremist elements within both the Sunni and Shia camps in order to broaden her constituency and thus bolster her legitimacy. On numerous occasions during her tenures, Karachi is said to have bordered on a state of civil war. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif did not alter the formula of these promethean dreams during his two aborted tenures in the 1990s. President (former General) Musharraf, while riding on a secular modernist platform, chose to turn a blind eye to the fomenting Islamist extremism, particularly in the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and Pakistan administered Kashmir, until the events of September 2001. Since 2001, Musharraf's government has now pursued a policy of war against the now quite consolidated Islamist extremist elements. The Frankenstein had not only been created by then, by was now on a course of its own.

The pragmatic logic of divide-and-rule policies and the policies of de facto appeasement (which is how 'turning a blind eye' as policy essentially became interpreted by the extremist elements) can perhaps be understood within the context of long held historical debate regarding the link between 'authenticity' and 'orthodoxy' in Pakistani civil society. This argument was most vociferously prevalent in the aftermath of the birth of the country in 1947 when the 'authentic' nature of Pakistan as a separate state for Muslims (the only state created to cater for a religious minority other than Israel in 1948) was being linked with the imperative of 'orthodoxy'. The creation of an Islamic state (a non-secular theocratic type state) was by this time being hailed by the very Islamists who had initially opposed to the idea of a separate state of Pakistan (as they considered Islam as transnational and thus not needing a demarcation as a separate state). Political legitimacy of subsequent governments and political parties thus became defined in terms of the extent to which they catered to this link, which even the most secular of all politicians could not ignore.

But if the link between authenticity and orthodoxy was troubling, the new link forged by the now emboldened Islamist extremist groups is even more disturbing - that of 'authenticity' with 'extremism'. As the incremental product of the years of myopic policies of the civilian and military governments' desire to consolidate their control, Islamist extremist groups seem to have culminated in the new *Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan*, literally translated as the Movement of the Taliban of Pakistan or the Taliban Movement of Pakistan. Although the entire configuration of this movement is unclear, it is becoming more evident that this movement is a patchwork

of other existing Islamist extremist groups – a Frankenstein that has been the product of selfish short-term policies of politicians and government officials intended to hold on to power and now becoming an entity challenging the government's notions of control and power.

The July 2007 'Lal Masjid' (or the Red Mosque) tragedy seems to have shed light on this emerging Taliban Movement of Pakistan. The crisis began July 3 when a group of Islamist extremists led by Maulana Abdul Aziz and his brother Maulana Abdul Rasihd Ghazi took all the occupants (students in residence) of the mosque hostage demanding a Taliban-style Islamic Shariah system in Islamabad. The crisis ended with Pakistani commandos storming the mosque on July 10, killing hundreds of men, women, and children. Details of the tragedy aside, what is noteworthy here is the links between the group in the mosque led by Maulana Aziz and Maulana Ghazi and the outlawed Islamist extremist groups such as Jaish-e-Mohammed (literally translated as the Army of Mohammed), Harkat ul-Mujahideen (literally translated as the Activity of the Mujahidden), Harkat-e-Jihad-Islami (literally translated as the Activity of Islamic Jihad) and the al-Qaeda and Afghan Taliban elements in Pakistan's NWFP.

Maulana Aziz and Maulana Ghazi's movement is thought to be linked with Baitullah Mehsud, the leader of the Taliban militants in the Waziristan section of the NWFP. Even more notable perhaps is that Baitullah Mehsud is thought by some in the Pakistani intelligence community to have been the mastermind behind Benazir Bhutto murder in December 2007. Maulana Aziz and Maulana Ghazi's movement is also thought to be linked with Maulana Fazlullah—also known as 'Mullah Radio' for his broadcasts of his Taliban treaties on banned radio stations in Pakistan—who is the leader of Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi, literally tanslated as the Movement for the Implementation of the Law of Mohammad (or Islamic Law).

Musharraf's government banned the popular Tehreek-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) in 2002, but has continued underground, developing a rigid Taliban rule in the Malakand region of the NWFP. Music and television is now banned in this region, and women are told that their marriages will be annulled if they do not get their husbands to grow beards. Decapitation of 'spies', security personnel, and now even women suspected of prostitution, has become common practice under the guise of Taliban rules. As trivial as these details may seem to some, these are indicative of the kind of totalitarian rule once consolidated by the Taliban government in Afghanistan (from the mid-1990s to 2001), the larger damaging consequences of which require no elaboration here given the ample scholarship devoted to that in the last many years.

The main targets of Maulana Aziz and Maulana Ghazi's movement, Baitullah Mehsud's Taliban movement, and the TNSM are the Pakistani security forces. In November 2006, a suicide bomber, possibly from the TNSM, killed 40 Pakistani army personal near an army garrison in Dargai. Many other such suicide bomber incidents have followed and continue to be a threat to the Pakistani armed forces and government officials. Indeed, after the Lal Masjid tragedy in July 2007, the TNSM declared a jihad against the Pakistani government, a declaration which is thought to have been directly linked to the suicide bomber attack on Pakistani soldiers in July 2007 in Swat (a valley in NWFP) killing an army major and 3 other soldiers.

The Islamist extremist Frankenstein is no longer confined to the whims of political power games and divide-and-rule policies of the governments that pursues its own selfish Promethean dreams of control in order to create an environment within which it could exist and thrive. That this Frankenstein is very much alive is apparent, an unintended consequence of the governments' instant-mix projects of political legitimacy. But that this Frankenstein has become emboldened is also apparent from the very coalitions it is successfully forging, coalitions such as the Taliban Movement of Pakistan, whose very power is based on those vulnerabilities of the government that had led to its ill-calculated pursuits of legitimacy in the first place. Or, if you may, the gravitational force of the Islamist extremist groups and movements in Pakistan is based on the unveiling of the weaknesses of legitimacy of the government whose Promethean dreams have been exercised through facades of absolute sovereignty, inevitability creating Frankensteins it can not control. That the Taliban Movement of Pakistan is potentially threatening the very integrity of Pakistan is illustrated in the conclusions of a confidential Pakistani Interior Minister Report that states "we have to move swiftly and decisively, lest NWFP falls under the aegis of Talibanization."[1]

Irm Haleem is an Assistant Professor in the Political Science Department at Seton Hall University. Her publications have examined Islamist extremism in South Asia and the Middle East. She is currently working on a book that broadens the regional scope of examination to include Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Europe.

NOTES:

[1] Hussain, Zahid, "The Battle for the Soul of Pakistan", in *Newsline* (Karachi, Pakistan), July 2007, p. 25.

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