Impact of War against Terrorism (WAT) on Pakistan’s Domestic Policies during Musharraf Regime

Dr. Mazher Hussain
Lecturer, Department of History, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Hasilpur Road, Bahawalpur, Pakistan

Dr. Shahid Hassan Rizvi
Associate Professor, Department of History, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Hasilpur Road, Bahawalpur, Pakistan

Dr. Aftab Hussain Gillani
Associate Professor, Department of Pakistan Studies, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Hasilpur Road, Bahawalpur, Pakistan

Abstract: With some 198 million citizens, Pakistan is the world’s second-most populous Muslim country, and the nation’s very foundation grew from a perceived need to create a homeland for South Asian Muslims in the wake of decolonization. However, religious-based political parties traditionally have fared poorly in national elections. An unexpected outcome of the country’s 2002 General Elections during Musharraf regime saw the Mutahidda Majlis-e-Amal (MMA or United Action Front), a coalition of six Islamic parties, win 11% of the popular vote. It also gained control of the provincial assembly in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and led a coalition in the Baluchistan assembly. These Pashtun-majority western provinces border Afghanistan, where U.S.-led counterterrorism operations are ongoing. Article in hand highlights the Impact of War against Terrorism (WAT) on Pakistan’s Domestic Policies during Musharraf Regime.

Keywords: War against Terrorism, Religion, Politics, Anti-Americanism, Taliban

I. Introduction

Right after its win and assuming power in NWFP, the Provincial Assembly passed a Shariat (Islamic law) bill. In both 2005 and 2006, the same assembly passed a Hasba (accountability) bill that many feared could create a parallel Islamic legal body. Pakistan’s Supreme Court, responding to petitions by the central government, rejected most of this legislation as unconstitutional, but in 2007 it upheld most of a modified Hasba Bill resubmitted by the NWFP assembly. Such developments alarm Pakistan’s moderates and the Pakistani President himself decried any attempts to “Talibanize” regions of Pakistan. The Islamist coalition was ousted from power in Peshawar and suffered major electoral losses nationwide when February 2008 polls saw the secular Pashtun nationalist Awami National Party take over the NWFP government. Still, in the latter months of 2008, nearly two-thirds of Pakistanis reported believing that Shariah law should play a greater role in the country’s governance.

Here is a brief gauge of the impact of the War against Terrorism on Pakistan’s domestic policies, both national and provincial ones, during Musharraf regime.

II. Anti-Americanism (Anti-American Sentiment)

Pakistan’s Islamists are notable for expressions of anti-American sentiment, at times calling for “jihad” against the existential threat to Pakistani sovereignty they believe alliance with Washington entails. Most analysts contend that two December 2003 attempts to assassinate President Musharraf were carried out by Islamist militants angered by Pakistan’s post-September 2001 policy shift. The “Pakistani Taliban” that has emerged in western tribal areas has sought to impose bans on television and CD players, and has instigated attacks on girls’ schools and nongovernmental organization-operated clinics, obstructing efforts to improve female health and education. Some observers identify a causal link between the poor state of Pakistan’s public education system and the persistence of xenophobia and religious extremism in that country. Anti-American sentiment is not limited to Islamic groups, however. Many across the spectrum of Pakistani society express anger at U.S. global foreign policy, in particular when such policy is perceived to be unfriendly or hostile to the Muslim world (as in, for example, Palestine and Iraq). In 2004 testimony before a Senate panel, a senior U.S. expert opined: “Pakistan is probably the most anti-American country in the world right now, ranging from the radical Islamists on one side to the liberals and Westernized elites on the other side.”
interview, President Musharraf conceded that “the man on the street [in Pakistan] does not have a good opinion of the United States.” He added, by way of partial explanation, that Pakistan had been “left high and dry” after serving as a strategic U.S. ally during the 1980s. When asked about anti-American sentiment in Pakistan during his maiden July 2008 visit to the United States as head of government, Prime Minister Gillani offered that the impression in Pakistan is that “America wants war.”6 A Pew poll taken shortly before Pakistan’s catastrophic October 2005 earthquake found only 23% of Pakistanis expressing a favorable view of the United States, the lowest percentage for any country surveyed. That percentage doubled to 46% in an ACNielsen poll taken after large-scale U.S. disaster relief efforts in earthquake-affected areas, with the great majority of Pakistanis indicating that their perceptions had been positively influenced by witnessing such efforts.

In December 2008, the Washington-based International Republican Institute (IRI) released a survey of public opinion in Pakistan taken in October. The findings indicated that significant resentment toward and distrust of the United States persist among large segments of the Pakistani public, which appears split on the issue of Pakistani military efforts to combat extremists:

1. Nearly two-thirds opposed Pakistan’s cooperation with the United States in the so-called war on terrorism;
2. nearly three-quarters opposed U.S. military incursions in Pakistan’s tribal areas;
3. one in three Pakistanis reported believing that either the U.S. or Pakistani government was responsible for the September Marriott bombing; only 7% blamed the Taliban or terrorists;
4. fully half said they opposed Pakistan army operations in western Pakistan; and a majority continued to express support for peace deals with religious extremists.7

A late 2008 Gallup survey found only one in seven Pakistanis holding the opinion that counterterrorism cooperation with the United States had benefitted their country. Yet, in more encouraging findings, three in five respondents to the IRI poll believed that religious extremism represented a “serious problem” for Pakistan, with a majority saying the Al Qaeda and Taliban presence in Pakistan was part of this. Moreover, a subsequent Gallup poll showed 60% of Pakistanis saying their government should take a tougher stance in efforts to rid the country of terrorist activities. Support for a harder line was found to be markedly higher in Punjab.8

Many of Pakistan’s madrasas are financed and operated by Pakistani Islamist political parties such as the JUI-F (closely linked to the Taliban), as well as by multiple unknown foreign entities, many in Saudi Arabia.9 As many as two-thirds of the seminaries are run by the Deobandi sect, known in part for traditionally anti-Shia sentiments and at times linked to the Sipah-e-Sahaba terrorist group. In its 2007 report on international religious freedom, the U.S. State Department said, “Some unregistered and Deobandi-controlled madrassas in the FATA and northern Baluchistan continued to teach extremism” and that schools run by the Jamaat al-Dawat, considered to be a front organization of the proscribed Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorist group, serve as recruitment centers for extremists. President Musharraf himself has acknowledged that a small number of seminaries were “harboring terrorists” and he has asked religious leaders to help isolate these by openly condemning them.10

III. Democratization and Human Rights

A. Democracy and Governance

The status and development of Pakistan’s democratic institutions are key U.S. policy concerns, especially among those analysts who view representative government in Islamabad as being a prerequisite for reducing religious extremism and establishing a moderate Pakistani state. There had been hopes that the October 2002 national elections would reverse Pakistan’s historic trend toward unstable governance and military interference in democratic institutions. Such hopes were eroded by ensuing developments, including President Musharraf’s imposition of major constitutional changes and his retention of the position of army chief. International and Pakistani human rights groups continued to issue reports critical of Islamabad’s military-dominated government throughout the Musharraf-dominated era. In 2008, and for the ninth straight year, Freedom House rated Pakistan as “not free” in the areas of political rights and civil liberties.11 General Musharraf’s assumption of the presidency ostensibly was legitimized by a controversial April 2002 referendum marked by evidence of fraud.12

The civilian government was hamstrung for more than a year by fractious debate over the legitimacy of constitutional changes and by Musharraf’s continued status as army chief and president. A surprise December 2003 agreement between Musharraf and the MMA Islamist opposition ended the deadlock by bringing the constitutional changes before Parliament and by eliciting a promise from Musharraf to resign his military commission before 2005.13 Non-Islamist opposition parties unified under the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD) accused the MMA of betrayal and insisted that the new arrangement merely institutionalized military rule in Pakistan. Further apparent reversals for Pakistani democratization came in 2004, including the sentencing of ARD leader and PML-N stalwart Javed Hashmi to 23 years in prison for sedition, mutiny, and forgery (Hashmi was released in 2007), and the “forced” resignation of Prime Minister Jamali for what numerous analysts called his insufficient deference to President Musharraf. Musharraf “shuffled” prime ministers to seat his close ally, Finance Minister Shaukat Aziz.14 Aziz was seen to be an able financial manager
and technocrat favored by the military, but he had no political base in Pakistan. In the final month of 2004 Musharraf chose to continue his role as army chief beyond the stated deadline. Moreover, nominally non-party 2005 municipal elections saw major gains for candidates favored by the PML-Q and notable reversals for Islamists, but were also marked by widespread accusations of rigging. The Bush Administration made no public comment on reported irregularities.\textsuperscript{15}

During their years of marginalization, the leadership of the country’s leading moderate, secular, and arguably most popular party—the Pakistan People’s Party—sought greater U.S. support for Pakistani democratization and warned that the space in which they were being allowed to operate was so narrow as to bring into question their continued viability as political forces.\textsuperscript{16} They also typically identify a direct causal link between nondemocratic governance and the persistence of religious militancy in Pakistan. In an opinion piece composed shortly before her 2007 assassination, Benazir Bhutto argued that the all the countries of the world had a direct interest in Pakistani democratization, reiterating her long-held view that dictatorship had fueled extremism in her country and that credible elections there were a necessary condition for the reduction of religious militancy.\textsuperscript{17}

\textbf{B. Human Rights Problems}

Pakistan is the setting for numerous and serious perceived human rights abuses, some of them perpetrated and/or sanctioned by the state. According to the Department of State, the Islamabad government is known to limit freedoms of association, religion, and movement, and to imprison political leaders. The Department’s most recent Country Report on Human Rights Practices (issued March 2008) determined that the human rights situation in Pakistan “worsened” during 2007, due primarily to President Musharraf’s six-week-long imposition of emergency powers and the attendant suspension of the constitution and dismissal of Supreme and High Provincial Courts. Along with concerns about these anti-democratic practices, the report lists extrajudicial killings, torture, and disappearances; “widespread” government and police corruption; lack of judicial independence; political violence; terrorism; and “extremely poor” prison conditions among the major problems.\textsuperscript{18} The most recent State Department report on trafficking in persons (issued June 2008) again said, “Pakistan does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking; however, it is making significant efforts to do so.” It again placed Pakistan at “Tier 2” due to Islamabad’s “limited efforts to combat trafficking in persons over the last year, particularly in the area of law enforcement.”\textsuperscript{19}

In June 2007, the House Appropriations Committee expressed concern about the Pakistani government’s apparent lack of respect for human rights. Senate reports have aired similar concerns.\textsuperscript{20} The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and international human rights groups regularly issue reports critical of Pakistan’s lack of political freedoms, lawlessness in many areas (especially the western tribal agencies), and of the country’s perceived abuses of the rights of women and minorities.\textsuperscript{21} For example, in reviewing the country’s human rights circumstances, the Lahore-based Joint Action Committee for People’s Rights asserted that, On the one hand policies of Musharraf and his civilian partners have fanned religious extremism and intolerance, sectarian divisions resulting in violence, provincial disharmony that has weakened the federation, and created a climate of impunity that has heightened the sense of insecurity in every Pakistani. On the other, their ham-handedness in combating terrorism has resulted in serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.\textsuperscript{22} The group strongly urged Pakistan’s civilian government to distinguish itself from the previous regime by promoting and protecting basic human rights.\textsuperscript{23} That government did in April 2008 ratify or sign three key international human rights conventions, a move lauded by London-based Amnesty International. The move was lauded by international human rights groups even as a lack of judicial independence and continued “disappearances” are identified as ongoing problems.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{IV. Religious Freedom}

The State Department’s most recent \textit{International Religious Freedom Report} (issued September 2008) again found that in practice the Islamabad government imposes limits on the freedom of religion in Pakistan. The Government took some steps to improve its treatment of religious minorities during the period covered by this report, but serious problems remained. Law enforcement personnel abused religious minorities in custody. Security forces and other government agencies did not adequately prevent or address societal abuse against minorities. Discriminatory legislation and the Government’s failure to take action against societal forces hostile to those who practice a different faith fostered religious intolerance, acts of violence, and intimidation against religious minorities. Specific laws that discriminate against religious minorities include anti-Ahmadi and blasphemy laws that provide the death penalty for defiling Islam or its prophets.\textsuperscript{24}

The State Department has rejected repeated U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommendations that Pakistan be designated a “country of particular concern.” The Commission’s most recent annual report (May 2008) asserts that, All of the serious religious freedom concerns on which the Commission has reported in the past persist. Sectarian and religiously motivated violence continues, particularly against Shia Muslims, Ahmadis, Christians, and Hindus, and the government’s response continues to be insufficient and not fully effective. The Commission finds that Pakistani government officials provide the country’s religious minorities with inadequate protections against societal violence.\textsuperscript{25}
Press freedom and the safety of journalists recently have become major concerns in Pakistan, spurred especially by the 2006 discovery of the handcuffed body of Pakistani journalist Hayatullah Khan in a rural area of North Waziristan. Khan, who had been missing for more than six months, was abducted by unknown gunmen after he reported on an apparent U.S.-launched missile attack in Pakistan’s tribal region. Khan’s family is among those who suspect the involvement of Pakistani security forces; an official inquiry into the death was launched. Other journalists have been detained and possibly tortured, including a pair reportedly held incommunicado without charges for three months after they shot footage of the Jacobabad airbase that was used by U.S. forces. Paris-based Reporters Without Borders placed Pakistan 152nd out of 169 countries in its most recent annual ranking of world press freedom.26 Pakistani journalists have taken to the streets to protest perceived abuses. In May 2007, the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists placed Pakistan sixth in a list of the ten countries where press freedom had most deteriorated since 2002. In early June, in apparent reaction to media coverage of rallies in support of Pakistan’s suspended Chief Justice, the Musharraf government issued an ordinance allowing the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Agency to impose strict curbs on television and radio station operations. Human Rights Watch later called the decree a “disgraceful assault on media freedom.”374 Implementation of the ordinance subsequently was halted. In September 2007, the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad expressed concern about recent incidents in which Pakistani journalists were subject to assaults and harassment.27 In its March 2008 human rights report, the State Department asserted that there was an increase in government arrests, harassment, and intimidation of journalists during 2007.28

V. Conclusion

The War against Terrorism affected almost all strata of Pakistani life. However; on political front, it gave a new turn to domestic policies. President Pervez Musharraf tried his level best to minimize the anti-American sentiments and helped in curtailing the overall impact of War against Terrorism. He faced a lot of criticism but ultimately, he succeeded in winning the consensus on domestic issues.

Notes and References

[1] In a late 2007 public opinion survey, 48% of Pakistani respondents completely agreed that “religion and government should be separate,” up from only 33% in 2002 (see http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/258.pdf).