



Development and the Battle for Swat

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In the early summer of 2009, world attention focused on Pakistan as Taliban militants gained a foothold just 70 miles outside of the nation's capital, Islamabad, challenging the country's nascent civilian government. The government responded with a strong show of military force, pummeling the Swat Valley and surrounding areas with tanks, heavy artillery, and helicopter gunships. In the process, some 2 million people were internally displaced leaving Pakistan on the brink of a large-scale humanitarian crisis. By late June however, the military operation had started yielding results and the government claimed that the Malakand Division, including Swat, had been cleared of the Taliban.¹ Most of the displaced civilians began returning to the area and international observers seemed satisfied that this story had come to an end. Yet, this battle, with its seemingly existential consequences and high-level human drama, was only one episode in a long chronicle of insurgency, extremism, and frustration in Swat.

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This paper examines the story of Swat through the prism of human development, taking a narrow view of the ongoing unrest among Taliban militants, the central government, and the disaffected people of the area. The paper begins by questioning the notion that the lack of development and economic opportunities has been a significant impetus for religious extremism and violence in Swat. It then evaluates other potential causes for the rise of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) as a political force in the area.² Next, the paper considers the Taliban's strategy of attacking symbols of modernity, such as girls' schools, infrastructure, and development-focused NGOs, as a means to exert its control and establish a monopoly on governance. Finally, the paper concludes with an assessment of the post-conflict needs of the people of Swat, looking within the development framework for long-term remedies and ways to secure a lasting peace in the scenic valley.

A Theoretical Perspective

While there is by no means an academic consensus regarding the effects of poverty on the rise of political violence, insurgency, terrorism, or extremism, many well known studies suggest a link. For example, in his seminal work, *Why Men Rebel*, Ted Robert Gurr put forth the theory of relative deprivation as a driver of political violence.³ According to Gurr, the disparity between what people expect to have and what they are capable of actually achieving creates

frustration which, when coupled with a number of other factors can lead to aggression and collective violence. A salient observation that comes from the relative deprivation theory is that people's economic, political, or even social expectations are not absolute. Instead, expectations are shaped by their environment and the experiences of those around them. More recently, a number of academic works focusing on civil wars and insurgencies have attempted to find a causal relationship between poverty and the onset of political violence. Most notable among this body of work is James Fearon and David Laitin's study, which finds poverty to be a positive indicator of violent domestic conflict.⁴ In addition to these empirical studies, many western and Pakistani policymakers and practitioners cite anecdotal evidence to support the notion that terrorism is a symptom of economic scarcity and the lack of education, healthcare, food security, and general societal well being.

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The conflict in Swat, however, is not easily explained by theories linking poverty and political violence. Historically, Swat has been home to a lucrative tourism industry, attracting both domestic vacationers and "adventure tourists" from abroad. Until recently, this bolstered Swat's local economy and garnered greater attention from the provincial and federal governments. Relative to other Pakistani cities, especially in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, Swat was generally in the upper range on a number of development indicators. Table 1 on page 10 is a comparison of four select development indicators for Swat relative to border areas. The overall provincial numbers for Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa are also listed.

As the table above indicates, Swat was among the better developed areas in the region, at least from 2005-2008, and many experts assert that "the basic demand of the people [of Swat] was not for development but speedy justice."⁵ The empirical evidence to support this claim comes

from a disparate collection of opinion polls, newspaper editorials, and human development data. This evidence suggests that the case of Swat fits better within a theoretical framework linking "social cleavages" rather than poverty to the onset of terrorism, insurgency, and/or civil war. One such framework is James Piazza's "rooted in poverty hypothesis," which tests the significance of poverty, malnutrition, inequality, unemployment, inflation, and poor economic growth as predictors of terrorism.⁶ Using data from terrorist incidents and casualties in ninety-six countries (including Pakistan) from 1986 to 2002, Piazza finds no significant relationship between any of the measures of economic development and terrorism. Instead, he finds that "variables such as population, ethno-religious diversity, increased state repression and, most significantly, the structure of party politics..." are better predictors of terrorism.⁷

Although informative, Piazza's work like other academic works discussed earlier, does not fully explain the onset of violence in Swat. Part of the problem is that the violence in Swat is difficult to define. Its perpetrators have been described variably as miscreants, terrorists, and insurgents—leaving observers to ponder whether Pakistan was fighting against criminal activity or battling a civil war in Swat. Whatever the characterization most local experts agree that economic development played a minor role, if any, as a driver of the Swat conflict.⁸ What was significant, however, was the constant and growing call for speedy justice and better governance that for too long went unanswered.

A Call for Justice

While the lack of economic development may not have been a main driver of conflict in Swat, the underdeveloped judicial system and ineffective local government certainly created social cleavages and played a major role in the rise of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) as a

political force in the area. The February 2009 passage of the *Nizam-e-Adl* regulation in which the federal government effectively agreed to a separate legal and judicial system for the Malakand District, is generally seen as a watershed in the conflict between the state and the Taliban. While the regulation was undoubtedly symbolic, the fight between the state and extremist forces for control of the judicial system has a long and complex history in Swat. For the purposes of this paper, it is important to examine this history to the extent that it can offer alternative, non-development based explanations for the advent of violence in Swat.

For most of its history, the Swat Valley had been an autonomous princely state that only nominally bore the flag of various sovereigns. It was not until 1969 that the princely state was dissolved and a slow and often tumultuous process of integration into Pakistan's administrative and legal structures began. In the ensuing 30 years, political parties began picking up on local discontent with the ineptitude of the judicial system. The long delays in resolving even straightforward civil claims, made many locals nostalgic for the *Sharia* or Islamic system of jurisprudence that had existed prior to the dissolution of the princely state. In 1995, the Tahreekh-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), a politically active militant group led by Sufi Muhammad, began agitating for *Sharia* courts in Malakand. Initially, the government responded with a show of force, using the Frontier Corps, a paramilitary unit, to move against Sufi Muhammad. This is now considered to be the first of four military operations against Sufi Muhammad's group, which would later morph into the TTP. The operation however was short-lived as the provincial government cut a deal with TNSM and agreed to a limited enforcement of *Sharia*. Arguments over the exact terms of the agreement, specifically in regards to the establishment of Islamic courts, created an uneasy peace punctuated by sporadic violence.

The government's patience with Sufi Muhammad seemed to run out in 2001 when he took a force of 10,000 to fight the Americans in

Afghanistan. Pervez Musharraf, the Pakistani president at the time, had Muhammad arrested and banned the TNSM. Despite this set-back, the movement continued to grow as Muhammad's son-in-law, Maulana Fazalullah took over and established links to the TTP. Fazalullah became known as the 'Radio Mullah,' operating 30 illegal FM radio stations through which he broadcasted his extremist views such as his opposition to female education. In July 2007, Fazalullah declared *jihād* against the Pakistan army in retaliation for its siege of the Red Mosque in Islamabad.⁹ This declaration brought on the second military operation against Sufi Muhammad and Fazalullah's group. Nevertheless, by fall 2007 Fazalullah had gained administrative control of Swat, setting up Islamic courts and attacking girls' schools. The violence continued as the military intensified its operation. Then, in April 2008, the provincial government embarked on a new peace process that resulted in a 16-point peace agreement. As part of the agreement, Sufi Muhammad was released from prison and Fazalullah was allowed to return to Swat. Peace however, was short-lived, as the agreement broke down in June 2008. Militants cited the continued presence of the army as a deal breaker and therefore reneged on the agreement.

From August to December 2008, the government engaged in its third military operation in Swat. Militants had gained control of most of the area and an estimated 80,000 girls were forced out of schools.¹⁰ Only after a public outcry did Fazalullah ease some restrictions, allowing girls until grade five to attend schools. In February 2009, the government passed the infamous *Nizam-e-Adl* regulation and ceded control of Swat. This would have likely been the end of the story if not for a number of missteps by the TTP. First, Taliban spokesman Muslim Khan began making belligerent public statements against the state of Pakistan, declaring the constitution, the Parliament, and democracy in general un-Islamic. Second, a video of a young woman being publicly flogged by the Taliban in Swat made its way onto Pakistan's mainstream media and was met with a nation-wide uproar. Third and perhaps most importantly, Sufi

Muhammad and Fazalullah's group began to position its fighters in the surrounding areas of Buner and Dir, signaling the spread of its influence there. For the military and civilian establishments and indeed for the Pakistani public, this physical spread of Taliban forces was an alarming development. Media pundits warned of an existential threat to Pakistan and there appeared a new sense of urgency. These three errors in judgment on the part of the TTP spurred the government into action once again. From May to September 2009 the military conducted Operation *Rah-e-Rast*, its fourth in Swat. This operation resulted in the escape of Fazalullah and the arrest of Sufi Muhammad, leaving administrative control of Swat to the army and federal government.¹¹

Thus, the Taliban—in one form or another—and the government have battled for years over the control of Swat's legal, judicial, and law enforcement structures. The government's failure has been its inability to establish effective administrative systems as a real alternative to the Taliban's brand of law, order, and speedy justice. Historically, instead of fixing systems in the "border areas" of FATA and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, the government has created separate policies for these areas and has acquiesced to having parallel systems in place.¹² Therefore, according to many experts, the real issue in Swat was a crisis of governance.¹³ The Taliban gained the support of the local people by filling an institutional vacuum.¹⁴ The need for effective governance was so great that local people were willing to overlook the Taliban's harsh tactics and particularly rigid interpretation of Islamic law. This allowed the Taliban to operate as a legitimate political entity that time and again challenged the authority of the provincial and federal governments.

A Symbolic Attack on Modernity

As discussed above, it was social unrest derived from judicial and governance issues and

not the lack of development that largely factored into the historical, pre-conflict narrative of Swat. However, human development and certain symbols of modernity have been a longstanding, albeit peculiar target of the Taliban and other Islamist militants in Pakistan. In Swat, the Taliban takeover led to a full-fledged attack on development, with hundreds of girls' schools, roads, bridges, and offices of development-focused NGOs destroyed. In 2008 alone, the Taliban destroyed 50 girls' schools in the Malakand District.¹⁵ In some ways, the attack on

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female education can be explained by the distorted religious and cultural reasoning that has found support in some parts of Pakistan for years. Historically, the patriarchal fight over who controls women—their dress, their mobility, and their voice—has been a mainstay of power politics in South Asia.¹⁶ It is not surprising then that Sufi Muhammad and later Maulana Fazalullah made girls' schools a symbolic target and means by which to exert their influence and challenge the state.

What is more difficult to understand is the seemingly indiscriminate destruction of infrastructure and organization in Swat. One explanation is that by destroying all evidence of a central authority, the Taliban made the people of Swat completely reliant on them for all basic services usually handled by the state. In other words, by razing all civic structure and organization, the Taliban was able to emerge as the only source of governance. This would also explain why NGOs were chased and threatened out of the area. With no one else providing public goods and services, the Taliban secured a monopoly on governance and acquired legitimacy that it would not have otherwise had. At a more practical level, the destruction of road and bridges further isolated the population and made the Army's advance more difficult. It also raised the costs of transportation, traditionally a source of funding for the Taliban.

However, attacking modernity in the age of technology and while Pakistan is in the midst of a media revolution is a risky strategy. Throughout most of the recent conflict, the local and national media was present in Swat.¹⁷ When the TTP made outrageous declarations against Pakistan's Parliament and constitution, it made national headlines and produced a strong public backlash. And when a young woman was publicly flogged in Swat, it was captured on a mobile phone and circulated worldwide as evidence of the Taliban's brutality. The video was shared on social networking sites and received international media attention. In Pakistan, the video incited a public debate over how to reap control back from the Taliban. The publicity received by both the TTP's statements challenging the legitimacy of Pakistan and the flogging video served to shift public opinion.¹⁸ Unlike previous campaigns, the military now had a broad-based endorsement of its operations in Swat. It was perhaps because of this public support that the military was able to see the last operation to conclusion rather than prematurely negotiating with the Taliban, as in previous operations. Ultimately, the Taliban's strategy of attacking development did not pay off and "the secular idea of modernity has survived for now" in Swat.¹⁹

The Post-Conflict Need for Development

The current, post-conflict environment in the Swat Valley presents a number of new challenges for the state of Pakistan. As of May 2010, the army had, by all accounts secured the area and taken over most governance and administrative functions. While there continues to be a depleted Taliban presence—as evidenced by sporadic but deadly bombings in the city of Mingora—the writ of the central government is no longer in question. But, in order to maintain this authority and prevent another Taliban advance, the government must be seen as a competent, accountable, and a legitimate wielder of power. As such, it must quickly and effectively respond to the very real post-conflict needs of the local people. Paramount among these needs is reconstruction. The latest conflict resulted in large-scale destruction of property and infrastructure that has affected millions of civilians. Another crucial need is one

that has been cited as an early cause of the conflict—the need for a just and efficient judicial system. The speed and commitment with which the government pursues reconstruction and responds to the local call for justice will determine the long-term outcome of the battle for Swat.

By early summer of 2010, reconstruction in Swat was only just beginning and was proceeding at a frustratingly slow pace. For example, while 137 schools had been destroyed in the conflict, by April 2010 the government had laid the foundation for only 20 schools.²⁰ Capacity limitations can partially account for the slow pace of reconstruction. The battle in Swat—combined with operations in Buner, Dir, and Waziristan—has left the Army and Frontier Corps overstretched.²¹ Further, the disbursement of foreign aid money has been met with a predictable set of administrative and cultural challenges. Donor agencies with access to funding, such as USAID, have historically found it difficult to conduct lasting and impactful development projects in Pakistan, particularly in parts of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and FATA. This is partly due to the dearth of local partners capable of handling larger, more complex reconstruction projects.²² Some donors such as the World Bank have attached conditions to their funding, creating administrative delays. In Swat, the ongoing delays "in the compensation for properties destroyed is creating unrest."²³

Although the civil administration is still not effective²⁴ and bureaucratic structures are not entirely in place, there have been some judicial system improvements in Malakand District, including the appointment of extra magistrates and the establishment of a time bar for cases.²⁵ In less than a year, the government also reduced the backlog of cases from 18,000 to 5,000 and has "pledged to create a circuit bench of the High Court in Mingora so that petitioners no longer need to travel to Peshawar, some 200 miles away by road."²⁶ Despite these improvements, many locals continue to call for a *Nizam-e-Adl* and the establishment of *Sharia* law, although they envision something very different from what was enforced by the Taliban.²⁷ They cite extrajudicial

killings of militants after the conflict and the thousands of untried suspected militants still in military custody as evidence of a broken, corrupt state judicial system.

How the government responds to the post-conflict needs of Swat will determine the extent to which it is seen as a legitimate authority in the area. The current, post-conflict stage will be seen in terms of justice—justice for those who have lost their homes and schools and justice for those seeking legal recourse.²⁸ In terms of reconstruction, the government must publicly and practically articulate its commitment to rebuilding the public property that was damaged or destroyed. While the construction of schools, particularly girls schools is ongoing, the government, with the help of national NGOs should set-up makeshift schools so that students' education is disrupted as little as possible. The Army Corps of Engineers and the Frontier Works Organization, both of which have a great deal of experience conducting lucrative, large scale public works projects throughout Pakistan, should apply their expertise in order to quickly rebuild critical infrastructure like roads and bridges. Further, the government should prioritize relationships with international donors to better navigate administrative and bureaucratic hurdles. To address concerns regarding the judicial system, the government should continue procedural improvements. While it cannot and indeed, should not agree to a separate judicial system for Swat, the federal government should allow for a greater degree of provincial autonomy at the local, circuit court level. Additionally, the government must swiftly and openly respond to allegations of military misconduct and extrajudicial killings. It must make every effort to give suspected militants a quick and fair trial, exemplifying a robust judicial system.

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Thus, although historically playing a limited role in the Swat conflict, development must now take center stage in the post-conflict environment. Appropriate governmental responses to local needs can help dissuade people from looking for alternative sources of governance. According to the Pakistan military, it has cleared the area of Taliban but even military officials agree that they cannot indefinitely hold the area and prevent future Taliban encroachments.²⁹ While the Taliban lost much of its support during its, often brutal reign of the Swat Valley, there continues to be a minority of people who sympathize with Maulana Fazalullah and would generally agree with the Taliban's religious message.³⁰ As seen by the sporadic bombings in Mingora, there also continues to be a small, ragtag contingent of militants waiting on the sidelines. Pakistan cannot afford to give these

militants the opportunity to grow and gain more support. It can no longer pursue its bi-polar strategy of deal making and yielding to Taliban demands followed by costly military operations against them. Instead, the government must look for long-term strategies to fill institutional vacuums and provide better, more effective governance.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, the battle for Swat was "one of the most successful cases of counterinsurgency in modern history."³¹ It represented a turning point for the Pakistani military, which after years decidedly recognized the Taliban as an enemy. The battle and the continuing struggle against Islamist militancy offer many lessons for Pakistan and the international community, particularly those countries and organizations focused on development as a means of fighting extremism. The case of Swat suggests that it is not always economic discontent that causes people to turn towards extremism. People are motivated by a

varied and often complex set of circumstances. In Swat, a broken judicial system, poor governance, and an institutional vacuum enabled Taliban to gain support by filling a void and offering needed services. Now that the Taliban has been dislodged from power, the government must publicly reassert itself as the legitimate authority. This means that along with ensuring law and order, it must address the post-conflict needs of the people, including reconstruction and development.

In late summer of 2010, the Swat Valley and indeed much of Pakistan faced severe flooding that exacerbated problems in an already critical environment. As of late August, much of the valley was a disaster zone with no electricity “and 34 of the 42 bridges in the area [having] been swept away.”³² The floods also increased the urgency for government action—not only in terms of rescue and recovery operations but also rehabilitation and long-term governance. In the aftermath of the floods, there were real concerns that the Taliban and other Islamist groups would take advantage of the situation to reestablish a foothold in Swat. In parts of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, “some hard-line Islamic groups [provided] shelter and food to flood victims, exploiting gaps in the government’s slow and

haphazard initial response to the floods.”³³ Further, the TTP advocated for attacks on foreign relief workers and urged people to reject aid from the United States.³⁴ It seemed that once again the Taliban was attempting to usurp governance functions by providing essential goods and services to gain the support of the local people.

Despite its flood-relief efforts, the Taliban for now, has been unsuccessful in re-establishing its control of Swat. There remains a military presence in the area that continues to be the target of sporadic attacks. While large-scale violence has decreased, there is by no means a sense of peace in the Valley or surrounding areas. And with each passing day it seems more unlikely that the government in Islamabad is capable of providing the type of reconstruction, development, legal reforms, and governance that would effectively address local grievances. As long as these grievances remain, the battle for Swat will not have been won.

The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author’s own, and do not necessarily represent those of Al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program for Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School.

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- ² Tehrikh-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) emerged in 2007 as an umbrella group for a number of Pakistani *jihadi* organizations. Since then, it has claimed responsibility for a majority of suicide and other attacks conducted within Pakistan's borders. Most recently, TTP has demonstrated global reach through its involvement in the failed Times Square bombing. While in many ways ideologically aligned with Afghani Taliban, TTP is structurally and organizationally distinct. Unless otherwise stated, this paper is referring to TTP when discussing "Taliban."
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- ⁵ Zafar Interview: Lt. Col. Mubarak Ahmad, National Defense University, April 30, 2010.
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- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ This observation is based on a variety of interviews the author conducted with academics, policymakers, and practitioners in Islamabad, Pakistan, April-May 2010.
- ⁹ From July 3-11, 2007, the government under Pervez Musharraf conducted a military operation against Islamic militants in the Lal Masjid and Jamia Hafsa complex in Islamabad. This operation came after various confrontations between authorities and militants led by Maulana Abdul Aziz and Abdul Rashid Gazi. The militants were calling for the overthrow of the Pakistani government and the imposition of an Islamic system of governance. The army stormed the complex and the operation resulted in over 100 deaths, including those of female madrassa students. Since then, Lal Masjid had become a rallying cry for Islamic militants across Pakistan and some believe that it is directly correlated to the increase in suicide bombings.
- ¹⁰ "Pakistan: Timeline on Swat Valley Turbulence," *IRIN Humanitarian News and Analysis* [<http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=82864>] Accessed August 23, 2010.
- ¹¹ Initial government reports that Fazalullah had been killed in the operation proved to be incorrect. He is currently believed to be in command of a Taliban unit in Konar, Afghanistan.
- ¹² Zafar Interview: Dr. Saba Gul Khattak, Pakistan Planning Commission, April 26, 2010.
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- ²³ Observations made during trip to Swat, Lt. Col. (R) Khalid Munir, Political Analyst, May 2010.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
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Table 1. Select Development Indicators for Swat Relative to Border Districts

| | Education | | Health | Infrastructure |
|--------------------|--|---|---|---|
| | <u>Primary School Enrollment per Thousand*</u> | <u>Female / Male Primary School Enrollment Ratio*</u> | <u>No. of Hospital Beds per Million**</u> | <u>Electricity Connections per Thousand</u> |
| Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa | 115 | 0.72 | 552 | 99.3 |
| Swat | 139 | 0.72 | 509 | 120.1 |
| Buner | 129 | 0.67 | 250 | 44.9 |
| Kohistan | 149 | 0.27 | 0 | NA |
| Lower Dir | 179 | 0.81 | 272 | 125.5 |
| Malakand | 122 | 0.89 | 597 | 113.3 |
| Shangla | 84 | 0.42 | 247 | 3.4 |
| Upper Dir | 139 | 0.57 | 137 | 0.1 |

Source: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Official Government Website [<http://www.khyberpakhtunkhwa.gov.pk/>] Accessed, September 20, 2010.)

Government schools and hospitals only. Does not include private or religious schools; nor government run dispensaries or disease-specific clinics.

Note: Population is based on official estimates for 2008-09. Education and Infrastructure numbers are from 2007-08 and Health numbers are reported as of January 1, 2005