

# **Pakistan hurtles from optimism to despair**

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## **Overview**

After nine years of the Musharraf era, 2008 saw the restoration of democracy in Pakistan. However, the hope and optimism that followed the end of a dictatorship soon gave way to widespread uncertainty. The Army once again began to reassert itself as the newly-elected civilian government weakened due to internal dissent and lack of will power. Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), a band of pro-Taliban groups owing allegiance to Baitullah Mehsud, took control of parts of FATA and NWFP and virtually surrounded Peshawar, the State's last symbol in the Frontier.<sup>1</sup> The liaison between the Taliban, anti-India Punjabi organisations and sectarian groups as demonstrated in the Marriott bomb attack (September 20, 2008) continued to grow. Relations with India plummeted after the Mumbai attacks with no breakthrough in sight. With a new administration in Washington sensitive of Pakistan's problems but suspicious of its intent, Pakistan is going to find itself with less room to manoeuvre in the days ahead.

## **Politics**

The people were quite emphatic in their February 18 mandate --they voted against President Pervez Musharraf and the party he supported, Pakistan Muslim League-Q (PML-Q). With the largest share of public vote, 124 seats, Pakistan People's Party (PPP) had the mandate of leading a coalition in Islamabad<sup>2</sup>. The results, surprising to many, however, unfolded some dramatic changes in the political scene. The most noticeable was the decision of two bitter rival parties— PPP and Pakistan Muslim League –N(PML-N)- to run a coalition government with a common minimum agenda which was sealed in Murree<sup>3</sup>. Equally significant was the emergence of Asif Ali Zardari as a key political figure. Third was the decision of Pakistan Army to withdraw itself from politics and bureaucracy.<sup>4</sup>

Like Benazir Bhutto did in 1988, Zardari out-witted the senior PPP leadership and appointed Yousaf Raza Gilani, a relatively light weight politician, as the Prime Minister in March 2008. In August when a beleaguered Musharraf bowed out, Zardari played a master-stroke of politics to nominate himself as a presidential candidate and won the elections to become the 12<sup>th</sup> President of Pakistan on September 6, 2008.<sup>5</sup>

His ascendancy to the Presidency against the promises he made to Nawaz Sharif at Murree, strained the `un-natural` marriage of bitter rivals.<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, the PPP-PML-N honeymoon ended as they failed to reach an agreement over the reinstatement of the deposed judges. Nine federal ministers of the latter resigned from the Cabinet<sup>7</sup>. Although Sharif continued to support the Zardari government, the mistrust and confrontation between the two grew.

What added to the growing political instability in Pakistan was the early signs of rifts within PPP—Gilani, for instance, began reasserting itself while other senior leaders voiced their opposition, muted though, to Zardari's style of functioning, particularly his insistence on relying on the group of advisers, mostly his friends, to run the government.<sup>8</sup>

## **Army**

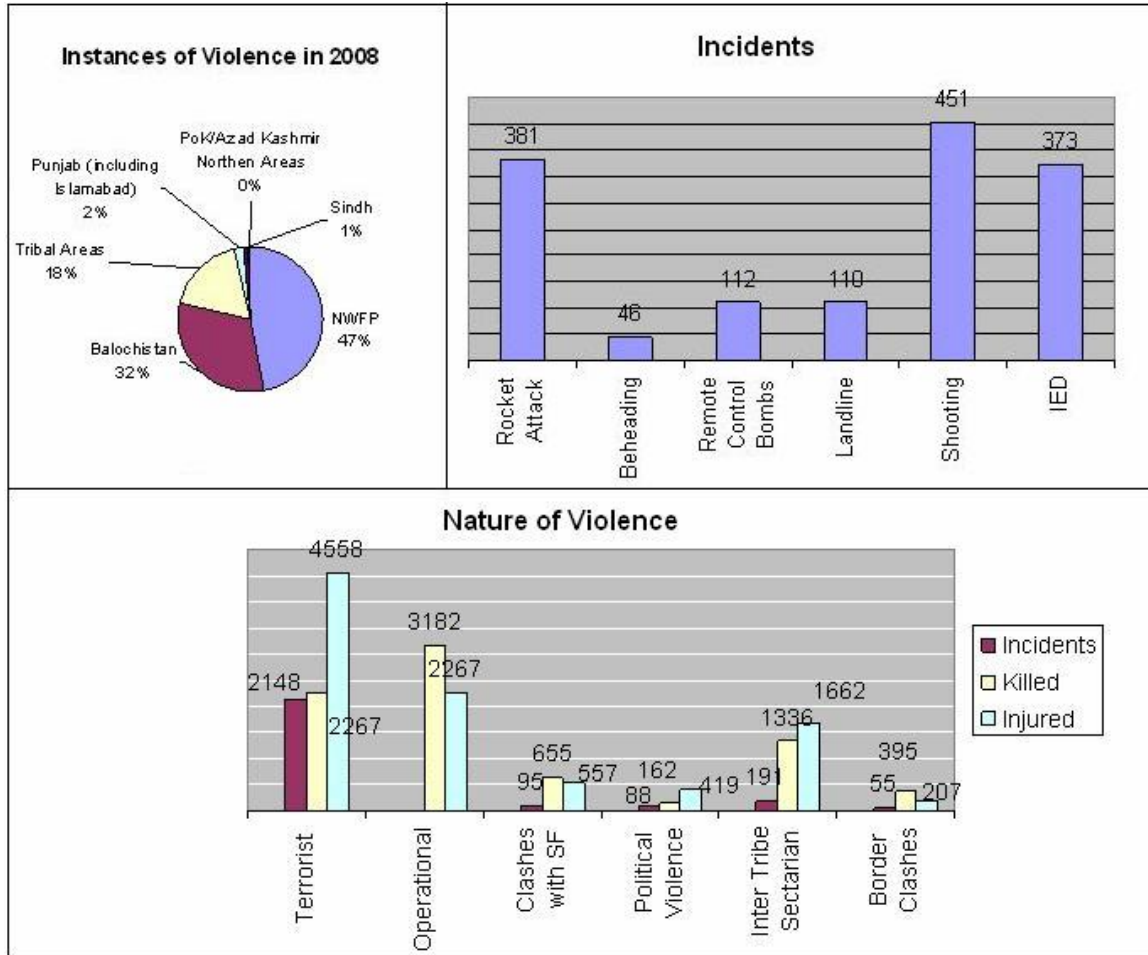
The inability of the political parties to measure up to the public expectations in such a short time benefited Pakistan Army in no less measure. The Army, which suffered severe dents to its image during Musharraf's fall, got a breathing space to re-establish its credentials. The newly appointed Chief of Army Staff Ashfaq Parvez Kayani's decision to keep politics out of the military helped the process. Kayani lost no time in asserting his authority over the army and, on more than one occasion, on the political leadership. He monitored military operations in FATA, scripted the fast evolving relation with the US, and also introduced changes in the army's top hierarchy.

In September, Kayani made sweeping changes in the army's leadership, cleansing the force of Musharraf's controversial legacy by sidelining officers who were closely aligned with the latter's politics and military policy, particularly in the tribal areas. This move further reaffirmed the Army's superiority over the civilian leadership in matters of strategy and security. This became quite obvious when the government backtracked (July 2008) on its publicised intent to put the ISI under the Ministry of Interior<sup>9</sup>. Earlier, Zardari had to eat his word when his assertion that Kashmir be put on the backburner and terming Kashmiri separatists as 'terrorists' were immediately retracted under pressure from an unhappy Army.<sup>10</sup> The cancelling of ISI Director Lt. Gen. Pasha's trip to Mumbai soon after the November 26 terrorist attack, once again publicly aired, only confirmed who called the shots in Islamabad.

## **Terrorism**

The surge in terror attacks after the Lal Masjid episode in July 2007 continued well into 2008. The troubled regions of the Frontier and Balochistan bore the

brunt of the violence. In fact, 2008 witnessed the greatest number of casualties in Balochistan, with the figure crossing the 400 mark for the first time in a decade.<sup>11</sup>



Source: Pakistan Security Report 2008, Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies

TTP's reach can be gauged by the fact that 12 attacks occurred in Punjab. There were four attacks in Islamabad, four in Lahore, four in Peshawar and two in Rawalpindi.<sup>12</sup> The increasing sophistication of liaison between the TTP, sectarian groups like the Lashkar-e-Janghvi (LeJ), and Punjabi groups like the Jaish-e-Mohammad became evident in the audacious truck-bomb attack on Hotel Marriott in Islamabad on September 20, 2008.<sup>13</sup> An attack of such magnitude near the Prime Minister's house and the National Assembly was an indication of the State's losing grip over security in Pakistan. In the run up to Muharram, as many as 30,000 places in 28 districts in Punjab were declared as 'sensitive' and 58 *ulema* were banned to pre-empt sectarian strife.<sup>14</sup>

After the failure of peace accords signed between the Awami National Party (ANP) government in NWFP and the pro-Taliban forces, the second half of 2008 witnessed intensified operations in Bajaur (Operation Sherdill), Swat (Operation Rah-e-Haq-II) and also in Khyber (Operation Daraghlum) and Mohmand. In August 2008, what had began as a well coordinated siege of a small village soon turned into a protracted campaign in Bajaur. Even after killing more than 1000 ‘miscreants’, the Army was unable to establish the State’s writ. For the first time in the so called insurgency, many influential tribes formed large *lashkars* (tribal militias) with increasing support from the security forces in order to hold seized terrain<sup>15</sup>. With the army lacking sufficient numbers, an uneasy stalemate has since emerged in Bajaur. Peace accords continued to hold in Waziristan in spite of more than three dozen drone strikes, and at least one ground assault by the US troops (September 2008).

The encirclement of Peshawar by the Taliban and its allies became almost complete last year. The Taliban abducted and killed a number of high profile Westerners.<sup>16</sup> Towards the end of the year, several hundred NATO supply trucks were destroyed, forcing a temporary closure of the Khyber Pass. Despite a three day offensive (Operation Daraghlum) in the adjoining Khyber Agency, ambushes on convoys are expected to continue in 2009<sup>17</sup>.

## **Relations with India**

The November 26, 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack carried out by 10 Pakistani nationals belonging to terrorist group Lashkar-e-Tayeeba (LeT) effectively destroyed the trust built between the nuclear rivals since 2004 and put them again on the brink of a conflict. Pakistan’s repeated refusal to accept the captured terrorists’ identity further added to the animosity between the two. Earlier in July, relations between the countries had run into rough weather as evidence emerged of the ISI role in the suicide attack on the Indian Embassy in Kabul.<sup>18</sup> The same period also witnessed more than 30 cease -fire violations along the Line-of-Control (LoC) after a gap of more than three years<sup>19</sup>.

The Mumbai attack saw Pakistan moving about 20000 troops to its eastern border<sup>20</sup> as India launched a diplomatic offensive, persuading the international community to lean heavily on Pakistan to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure created to target India.

## **Economy**

Pakistan's economy spiralled downwards in 2008 and had to be eventually rescued by a \$7.6 billion IMF loan to prevent it from a balance of payments crisis. Inflation skyrocketed from 7.7% in 2007 to 18.8 percent by December 2008.<sup>21</sup> Besides the overwhelming economic burden such borrowing brought on Pakistan, it posed serious challenges to the government. The IMF stipulations of bringing agriculture sector into the tax net and a 30% tax cut in defense expenditure put the government between a rock and a hard place. For now, the IMF loan has helped stabilize the economy, but the Pakistani rupee has been devalued by almost 20 points in the past year.<sup>22</sup> The ball is in the court of the PPP-led government, already besieged by a conflict with the Taliban -al Qaida combine, to put the country back on the rails, a task which has been daunting enough at best of times in the history of Pakistan.

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<sup>1</sup> Peshawar, the provincial capital of NWFP, houses the Headquarter of Army's XI Corps and the Frontier Constabulary.

<sup>2</sup> PML-N, ANP and later the MQM were the other prominent members of the coalition.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Murree Declaration, prior to the proposed revocation of the 17<sup>th</sup> Amendment, neither PPP or PML(N) could unilaterally nominate a candidate for the President.

<sup>4</sup> Satish Kumar (editor), *India's National Security Annual Review 2008* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2008)

<sup>5</sup> Dr. Farzana Shaikh, "Pakistan's New President" *Chatham House*, September 8, 2008 <http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/media/comment/zardari/>

<sup>6</sup> In the past, PPP's Farooq Leghari, too, had to give up the party membership to become president in 1993. "Analysis: Pakistan's future leader?", *Al Jazeera*, September 3, 2008 <http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/pakistanpowerandpolitics/2008/09/20089413211355183.html>

<sup>7</sup> "Govt accepts 'N' resignations", *The Daily Times*, September 11, 2008

<sup>8</sup> "Political instability looms large", *orfonline.orf*, January 23, 2009 <http://orfonline.org/cms/sites/orfonline/modules/analysis/AnalysisDetail.html?cmaid=15679&mmacmaid=15680>

<sup>9</sup> "Reform in ISI", *The Daily Times*, September 17, 2008

<sup>10</sup> "Zardari: we intend to solve Kashmir problem", *The Hindu*, March 9, 2008

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“Zardari backtracks on J&K terrorists remark, says Pak policy unchanged”, *The Times of India*, October 6,2008

<sup>11</sup> “2008 most violent year in a decade for Balochistan”, *The Daily Times*, January 3,2009

<sup>12</sup> “889 killed, 2,072 hurt in 61 suicide attacks this year”. *The News International*, December 22, 2008

<sup>13</sup> “Lashkar-i-Jhangvi carried out Marriott attack: Malik”, *The Dawn*, December 23, 2008

<sup>14</sup> Vikram Sood, “Jihadi social base is Pakistan's Frankenstein monster”, orfonline.orf, January 9, 2009

<http://www.observerindia.com/cms/sites/orfonline/modules/analysis/AnalysisDetail.html?cmaid=15645&mmacmaid=15646>

<sup>15</sup> “Salarzai Lashkar kills militant in Bajaur to avenge elders killing”, *The News*, August 27, 2008

<sup>16</sup> “U.S. to Widen Supply Routes in Afghan War”, *The New York Times*, December 31, 2008

<sup>17</sup> “Major breakthrough in Khyber Agency operation claimed”, *The News International*, January 2, 2009

<sup>18</sup> “Suicide Bomber Kills 16 in Kabul Near Embassy”, *The New York Times*, September 8, 2008

<sup>19</sup> “LoC ceasefire violation: Pak troops fire in Jammu sector”, *The Indian Express*, August 15, 2008

<sup>20</sup> “South Asia Weekly Assessment 51”, orfonline.org, December 22, 2008,

<http://www.observerindia.com/cms/sites/orfonline/modules/weeklyassessment/WeeklyAssessmentDetail.html?cmaid=15585&mmacmaid=15586&volumeno=I&issueno=51>

<sup>21</sup> “Inflation Outlook 2008-09: Inflation to slide to 9.5% by June-end”, *The Daily Times*, January 19,2008

<sup>22</sup> “Pakistan: A Mounting Problem for Obama”, *Time*, January 26, 2009