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Radicalisation of Pakistan and Its Impact on India*

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INTRODUCTION

Religious upsurge and terrorist violence are without doubt signs of spreading radicalisation in Pakistan but presently there is no religious group that can muster public support at the national level. Radicalisation represents a threat at several levels with the worst case scenario being the possibility of Pakistan becoming a Talibanised state, with a formal structure of a rigid Islamic state dominated by a strong religious hierarchy. The possibility of a violent takeover by any religious group replicating the Taliban take-over in Afghanistan seems remote but there are disturbing developments visible in the country with large segments of the society veering towards radicalisation. However, if Pakistan were to become a Talibanised state, the society at large, and the ruling elite, would have to accept the religious ideology that is being propagated by certain ultra-conservative clerics; presently there is no militant cleric group strong enough to dictate terms to the powerful urban elite in Pakistan.

To examine the present trend towards radicalisation, one has to look at the developing mindset of different socio-economic ethnic groups and the army. A close study of Pakistani society shows that more than 70 million Pakistanis are below 15 years of age; it is their religious mindset that can give the best indication of the direction Pakistan society may take in the future.¹ Conservative and rigid religious beliefs exist in many segments of the society, besides the tribal areas that are under the influence of al Qaeda and the Taliban, but

these do not necessarily translate into Islamic radicalism. The rich urban groups would prefer democracy and modernization even though they would like Pakistan to become a truly Islamic state. The reactions of this segment must be watched carefully to assess the present and future trends towards radicalisation of Pakistan.

Conservatism cannot and should not always be equated with extremism and terms such as radicalisation, fundamentalism and religious intolerance should be examined in relation to the religious upsurge now being witnessed in Pakistan because of the American-NATO military intervention in Afghanistan

Antagonism towards non-believers, moderate Muslims, Sufism and Shiites are signs of growth of radical culture; rise of such trends in some segments of Pakistani society are clearly visible and these trends could push Pakistan into the lap of radical Islamists. Moderate Muslims, who would like the secular culture to survive and the current unrest to be controlled, have become helpless spectators in the face of increasing political chaos and coercive religious violence.

The reverses faced by the Pakistan army in its fight against jihadi forces indicate that there is a growing reluctance in the army ranks to fight its own people; a long drawn confrontation between the two may further complicate the situation. The indifferent performance of the Pakistan army in Waziristan also shows the lack of preparedness to fight a war which it is now facing, on the other hand daring ambushes

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and attacks against the army show the emergence of new militant groups are fully trained and equipped to challenge the army. The recent attack in the highly sanitised area of Army Headquarters at Rawalpindi revived the doubts that supporters of radical elements, opposed to the policies of President Musharraf, have infiltrated into the inner circles. These elements believe that it is their religious duty to fight the forces that are instrumental in promoting the “anti-Islamic US agenda” in Pakistan. In these circumstances, the army cannot be expected to play a meaningful role in combating jihadi-terrorism; of course, the assumption that the army is increasingly being radicalized and is a divided house now needs to be confirmed further because there are strong elements within the army who are opposed to any attempt of Talibanisation of the army or of Pakistani society. The assumption that the society at large, and the army, is veering towards radicalisation may not be justified as about 70 per cent of the population of Pakistan resides in those areas of Punjab and Sindh, where cultural traditions and economic aspirations are closer to those of moderate Indian society next door. These regions also provide 84 per cent of the officer class to Pakistan army.²

The situation in Balochistan, Waziristan and the Northwest Frontier Province is different because tribal culture there easily translates into Islamic fundamentalism; those who want Islamic laws to replace the secular laws in this region have an inherent advantage. The fundamentalists are helping al-Qaeda and providing safe haven to it in the mountainous and remote areas bordering Afghanistan because they think it will eventually help them in fighting the government that is maintaining close ties with Washington. The peace accord with Islamic militants in North Waziristan, that sent the army back to the barracks, has collapsed, allowing al-Qaeda to spread its tentacles without hindrance.

The growing resentment against the heavy-handed tactics of the Musharraf regime has fueled violence all over the country and rule of law has collapsed in many parts of Pakistan. This chaotic situation is helping the protagonists of radical Islam; when machine-gun fire can be directed at the President's plane in the country's Capital, the growing support of radical elements is quite evident.

The attacks that regularly kill Pakistani soldiers in ambushes and pitched battles, inflicting heavy casualties on

them, demonstrate the growing military capability of the fundamentalist forces. Many religious groups, so far favourably inclined towards Islamabad, are turning against the government and joining the radical groups.

The imposition of emergency should be seen in the light of the above developments, beside the feud between President Musharraf and the judiciary. It is too early to predict the future course of events in Pakistan even after the emergency has been lifted but imposition of emergency has certainly helped the radical groups in gathering support for their fight against the moderates and the authority of the central government has been eroded.

POLITICAL TRENDS

Whether the religious parties would continue to be sidelined in the electoral process in Pakistan, as in the previous years, and receive only about than 11 per cent votes—the PPP got more than 29 per cent votes in 2002—is no longer certain.³ The perception that American policies are anti-Islamic is accepted by a majority of the people in Pakistan and in this environment religious groups may get support from a sizable segment of Pakistan's young urban population that has so far been opposed to religious parties and their radical agendas. There is a fear that even if a political party forms the government it may not last because the army may derail the democratic process once again

There are various anti-extremist lobbies in Pakistan who may put up a spirited fight against the radicalisation of Pakistan; though the urban elites, that support secular ideas and moderniza-

tion, still wield considerable influence over depressed classes which form the largest segment of voters, these classes may eventually turn towards extremism and violence if the religious parties gain a dominant political position. In present day Pakistan, 'almost 30 million boys and girls under the age of 15 belong to families that earn less than \$2 per day'.⁴ This socio-economic disparity among large segments of the population could lead to radicalisation of Pakistani society.

The correlation between poverty and radicalisation of the younger generation will continue until the dysfunctional schools that tend to promote radical ideas among the lower socio-economic classes are modernised. Surveys reveal that products of these schools are prone to idealise figures like Osama bin Laden and distrust ideas that do not fit the frame-

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work of Islam introduced to them by the madrasa system. The education system that creates fundamentalists must be changed at the earliest or Pakistan would have a large population of underprivileged youth who will lend support to radical Islam as an alternative to the present system. If this segment of the population joins religious groups, a shift in Pakistan polity to radicalism will be a greater possibility; it should be noted that the lower ranks in military and civil service cadres also belong to this class. The current socio-economic conditions, coupled with the madrasa education, make it much easier for al Qaeda and other religious groups who propagate radical ideas to permeate the society.

The policy advocated by the US for reforming the madrasa system would have been accepted in Pakistan if the US had not become an object of hate in the country. It is doubtful any scheme introduced by Americans or their allies will find any takers in Pakistan even if it is for their betterment; the people outright will reject any scheme that would mean closer engagement with Washington. Efforts so far made by the Pakistan government to change the outlook in madrasas and wean them away from jihadi radicalisation have largely failed. A large number of madrasas have not even responded to government schemes of registration; on the other hand, generous funding by foreign contributors such as Saudi Arabia for promotion of Wahhabism has helped the growth of radical institutions.

The presence of American and NATO forces in Afghanistan and military action, which mostly kills common people, has created new radical groups among the well to do classes in Pakistan. Some Pakistanis and Afghans in Pakistan are reported to have trained potential suicide bombers; the alleged plotters of bombings in London seem to have made several visits, received monetary help and technical assistance in Pakistan. "You must understand," says Maulana Sami ul-Haq, principal of Darul Uloom Haqqania, a seminary in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, "that Pakistan and Islam are synonymous."⁵

The well-planned suicide attack on Benazir Bhutto on December 27, 2007 that killed her demonstrated the reach of the radical groups in mainland Pakistan. It was quite clearly demonstrated to Benazir Bhutto when she returned to Pakistan on October 18 that she had now entered jihadi territory. On her return to Pakistan after the emergency, her

e-mail said, "The situation is grim, the risks are high, but I have faith in the people to turn around the problem if we can get a real election."

Subsequent statements of Benazir Bhutto reflected the prevailing political situation in Pakistan. In a November 3 e-mail, Benazir Bhutto said, "Those who support the Taliban and oppose me continue to have high positions in government. Musharraf doesn't remove them nor has he kept any of the promises he made guaranteed by third parties. Yesterday (before Musharraf's state of emergency), television channels broadcast a meeting in Bajaur (one of the seven tribal agencies that border Afghanistan) where a mullah claimed that he and his group will kill me in Rawalpindi."

Bhutto's e-mail added, "The fact that militants hold open meetings without fear of retaliation proves that the Musharraf regime is totally inept, unwilling or colluding in their expansion."⁶

The views and the intentions of the radical groups were clearly stated by Mahmoud Al Hasan, a leader of the extremist Hizb-ul-Mujahedeen, the militant wing of Jamaat-e-Islami. He declared Benazir Bhutto and Musharraf as "slaves" of the US. Bhutto, in addition, was labeled an infidel. "What should be the reaction of jihadis?" Hasan asked. "They should definitely kill her. She is an enemy of Islam and jihadis".⁷

SIGNATURES OF RADICALISATION

The centre of gravity is shifting from groups to individuals; the number of people who now support the radicals and propagate an anti-American line is significant. It may be far more difficult to counter this trend that is fuelling

Islamic terrorism than it is generally assumed. As a recent study of violent extremism among Pakistanis suggests, the battle of ideas is being lost rapidly and providing an even playing field for moderate leaders and opinion makers is becoming more and more difficult. Violence and extremism perpetrated in the name of religious ideology is now directly linked with the American led war in Afghanistan and the Pakistan army crackdown in Waziristan and other parts of the western frontier.

Taliban militants have taken control of many parts of Peshawar; several suicide attacks have taken place here; visitors need police escorts, schools for women have been closed, video and music shops have been destroyed and barbers who dare shave beards are punished. A public moral-

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ity law is being considered that will give mullahs power to prosecute anyone who does not follow the ban on dance and music. Polio vaccination has been banned because it is considered a US plot to curb the increase in the Muslim population.

Darul Uloom Haqqania, a seminary in the North-West Frontier Province and one of the largest madrasas in Pakistan, displays tanks and Kalashnikovs much like a military training school. About 3,000 young students, mostly from the depressed classes, pass out every year from here and, as a matter of course, are expected to spend their lives in service of Islam, and dedicate their lives to jihad. These young men, sport long beards, wear white turbans and drab 'shalwar' suits. Young mullahs who supervise the education of these youth, unlike their traditional counterparts, are technology-wise and understand the importance of the media. They also share the rigid Islamic ethos that the Taliban advocated and practiced in Afghanistan. A new brand of jihadi females are emerging in Pakistan; these 'burqa-clad' students, who belong to two madrasas attached to the Lal Masjid, brandish sticks while they demand imposition of sharia laws and the banishment of all 'dens of vice'.⁸

The so-called Pakistani Taliban appeared on the scene after the u-turn by General Musharraf and now is the visible and violent face of the revolt against his government. Rahimullah Yusufzai, a Peshawar-based columnist, says of these radical elements, "they are totally Pakistani, with a better understanding of how the world works." Their jihad is aimed not just at "infidels occupying Afghanistan", but also the "infidels" who are ruling and running Pakistan and maintaining the secular values of Pakistani society. "They aim at nothing less than to cleanse Pakistan and turn it into a pure Islamic state," says Rashed Rahman, executive editor of the Lahore-based *The Post*.⁹

The Taliban have declared Waziristan an "Islamic emirate" and have established sharia courts and Islamic taxation system.¹⁰ The Pakistan government allowed them to run their affairs unhindered with al-Qaeda in lead. It realized the gravity of the situation only when it was too late. Well-armed jihadis have recently captured large areas and declared Islamic laws there. This movement is rapidly spreading to new areas of Pakistan; the danger of radicalisation of the country and the radical movement influencing some other parts of

the South Asian region cannot, therefore, be ruled out

AT THE GRASSROOTS

The efforts of the Pakistan government to curb the militant activities of madrasas that provide recruits for the jihadi movement have generally been half-hearted; no wonder, violence and lawlessness has been spreading to new areas in Pakistan. Security forces have generally proved ineffective in dealing with the Taliban elements calling for Islamic laws. The Pakistani army operating in Waziristan has suffered heavy casualties. Several military men have surrendered without a fight. Masked rebels in the Swat Valley recently paraded 48 men of the paramilitary forces who had surrendered as soon as their hilltop position was surrounded; in other words, they put up no resistance. They were later freed and given 500 rupees each, perhaps after promising

to fight no more. "We had exhausted our rations and ammunition. We had no option but to surrender," one of the freed men explained. He did not give his name and, like the others, had shed his uniform.¹¹

Pakistan has rushed more troops to Swat to confront Maulana Fazlullah who has thousands of fighters at his disposal. They have taken control of several villages in the Swat Valley and set up check posts. They have even attacked an ancient rock carving of Buddha reminiscent of the destruction of the famous statue of Bamiyan. Fazlullah is also known as "Mullah Radio" for his speeches on his private radio station, in which he gives daily calls of jihad and enforcement of strict sharia laws in the country.¹²

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Significant casualties and scant public support for the operation in Waziristan "will become a problem in the future," says Moeed Yusuf, Director of Strategic Studies at Strategic and Economic Policy Research, a think-tank in Islamabad. "If this continues, the Army will tone down the operations down because there will be too many losses", he says.¹³

Some 250 Pakistani soldiers, including officers, are reported to have surrendered to militants without firing a shot. It is estimated that the army has suffered at least 1,000 fatal casualties in this area.¹⁴

INTERNATIONAL LINKAGES

The radical Islamic movement in Pakistan is connected with the global jihadi movement and is not a local phenomenon.

Regardless of geo-political realities, its immediate aim is to establish a revolutionary Islamic regime in Pakistan. It is essentially a jihadi response to counter American policies and military activities in Pakistan, Afghanistan and other parts of the world in the last few years.

The Islamic movements have grown rapidly in those countries where Americans have major strategic stakes. In Egypt, Algeria, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and parts of West Asia they have found mass support. What links this movement is religious affinity and anti-Americanism, regardless of geographic, historic or cultural diversities. The fact that western economic infrastructure has brought them prosperity does not deter them from attacking it. Despite variation in the local conditions, the pan-Islamist movement first attracted people from the rural background; later the urban destitute also joined the Islamic movement; together, they support the basic infrastructure for the global Islamic movement that represents its awesome destructive power. Al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan- Pakistan region are the manifestation of this phenomenon.

The common man in Pakistan views the Taliban as Islamic warriors in the US-Zionist war against Islam. The employment of the Pakistan army against them is greatly resented since it is being used to kill Muslims at America's behest. In these circumstances, the Pakistan Army may get divided horizontally and vertically, resulting in chaos in the country and further gains for fundamentalist organizations.

According to some observers, cracks are already visible in the rank and file of the army. A segment of the army brass believes that there is no need to rush matters; that the militants are their own people who will still be around when Americans leave the region and Pakistan should not abandon them at the behest of the US administration. In these circumstances, intervention of the international community may become necessary for controlling and stabilizing those areas of Pakistan, which may come under Taliban- al Qaeda control.

It is evident that Musharraf's about turn and alignment with the US is mainly responsible for the radicalisation of the common people, discontent in the army and the intelligence services of Pakistan. The deployment of troops to fight their own kinsmen at the behest of the United States has created discontent in the army. The deal in Waziristan was

an attempt to reduce the involvement of troops; however, it did not work and finally collapsed because of the anti-US sentiments and the fatalities, especially of common people, despite the deal

One critical factor in this political chaos is the emergence of close links between the al Qaeda-Taliban combine and domestic terrorist groups such as Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad, which are also operating in Kashmir. The devious policy of supporting some radical groups on the one hand and fighting al Qaeda on the other works in favour of al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban in confronting the government forces. It is difficult for the government of Pakistan to attack al Qaeda and Taliban as terrorist organizations and help their domestic allies as "freedom fighters" at the same time. The terrorists operations in Kashmir that are being conducted by domestic terrorist organizations of Paki-

stan in collaboration with the Islamist political parties still have the support of the army and intelligence services of Pakistan, despite their close links with al Qaeda. The international community is not ready to accept this position and this has somewhat complicated matters for the Musharraf regime.

The overall situation in Pakistan seems rather bleak. Talibanisation of frontier regions continues at a rapid rate and jihadi elements continue to gain more support elsewhere. The ongoing movement for Balochistan's independence has not abated and a large military presence is required to keep things under control. This is another arena of radicalisation that, along with suicide bombings, forms a dangerous arc where anarchy and radicalisation

prevail. If the control here goes into the hands of radical groups who have close links with the Taliban in Afghanistan, the authority of the central government will be further eroded in this region. In these conditions, the possibility of radicalisation of large areas of Pakistan will increase. Some backlash may occur if radical elements create more violence in cities like Lahore and Karachi, but this will have little impact on the radical elements or the prevailing chaos.

A large amount of money is being spent on procurement of illegitimate arms after the reestablishment of the drugs trade in Afghanistan. The illegal drug trade, smuggling of arms and taxation of goods moving between Afghanistan and Pakistan has created a black economy that provides funds to Taliban and al Qaeda on both sides of the border. The US

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policy in the region to oust al Qaeda has obviously been a failure; on the other hand, al Qaeda has revived its activities with greater vigour. Now there is a closer relationship between al Qaeda, the Pakistani Taliban, Islamist parties, and some military and intelligence officials of Pakistan. The joint effort of this combine is strengthening radical elements all over Pakistan and this may soon pose a serious challenge to all secular and democratic organisations in Pakistan. Jamaat-i-Islami, which is an important constituent of the Musharraf government under the banner of MMA, has been a supporter of al Qaeda all along and it is still providing shelter to many of its operatives in Pakistan. If this group makes gains in the forthcoming elections, the danger of further radicalisation of the Pakistan society cannot be ruled out.

The unstinted support of the Musharraf regime for the US policy in Afghanistan is largely responsible for the rise of fundamentalism, especially because the US strategy is still based on application of military power to achieve its objectives in the region. Insufficient understanding of the deep affinities between Pakistani and Afghan societies by the US policy makers and double dealing by certain groups in the Pakistan establishment is now quite apparent.

On the positive side, there has been a significant economic recovery in Pakistan in recent years; it achieved about 6-8% growth rate despite its political problems. The generous IMF aid has greatly helped the economic recovery of Pakistan but this has not improved the conditions in vast under developed areas or translated into the well being of the ordinary people in urban areas.¹⁵ The growing influence of jihadi Islam and enforcement of strict Sharia laws will undermine development efforts and hamper economic progress.

CONCLUSIONS

- Pakistan is a failing state that may collapse after a bitter internal war but it will still remain the epicentre of the global jihadi movement and the principal breeding ground of Islamic radicalism.
- Taliban, al Qaeda and their supporters now have a large armed following, secured bases and sanctuaries in the tribal areas of Pakistan, which they will continue to hold. Their domain is likely to remain confined to remote tribal belts for the present and their influence over the rest of the country will be limited.
- The political turmoil in Pakistan has created a dangerous and chaotic environment in which the influence and following of the radical groups has increased greatly. They have support bases in mainland Pakistan as is apparent from suicide attacks that have been launched by them in several parts of Pakistan.
- An upsurge in suicide attacks has taken place lately in

Pakistan, amounting to more than two attacks a week. The country saw 60 suicide attacks last year. There are several suicide bombers waiting to attack security establishments and prominent leaders. Large number of suicide attacks on sensitive targets could create conditions that could trigger a civil war. These conditions, in a country that has a large stock of nuclear weapons, will pose the gravest danger the world has faced in recent time.

- A large number of Pakistani troops have been killed, injured and captured in Waziristan and other northwestern areas. Some have chosen to join the Taliban and some others have been let off after a pledge that they will not fight their 'brothers'.
- Pakistan is in the throes of momentous changes and battlelines between the moderates and hardliners are now clearly drawn. There is also a power struggle between political parties and the army; this tussle may eventually benefit the radical groups. The turmoil that has started in Pakistan will not subside in the coming months; on the other hand, it may simmer for years and drag the country into a prolonged civil war. In the meanwhile, radicals may get complete control of the tribal belt from north to south and function as an autonomous Islamic region.
- The struggle between moderates and hardliners, suicide bombers and the establishment will continue unabated and if the army fails to control the situation, chaos will prevail and Pakistan may collapse as a nation state. This collapse of the central authority will perhaps lead to a lot of infighting among several jihadi factions that may spill over to neighbouring countries.
- The western frontier region of Pakistan is already a fully operational al Qaeda- Taliban base with a wide range of facilities for training extremists and facilitating terrorist attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Waziristan is also a refuge for extremists of various nationalities; thousands of Uzbeks, escaping the crackdown by the security forces in the town of Andijan have joined al Qaeda in Waziristan.
- The militants and terrorist operating in Kashmir will get a free hand because of the prevailing chaos and carry on their depredations with the help of the Pakistani Taliban and some foreign groups. Bomb attacks on Indian cities may be stepped up and communal tensions may be stirred further. The LoC and border areas are likely to remain calm, as Pakistan army will be involved in the internal problems and perhaps a power struggle within its own ranks. The scenario that the Pakistan army may raise the India bogey to unite the nation by disturbing peace on the borders is unlikely as this may prove far too risky; it would be beyond the capability of the Pakistan army to open another front.

- In the meanwhile, Islamabad will continue to play a double game; while it struggles to contain the forces of radical Islam, a part of its intelligence services will covertly support the Taliban in Afghanistan. The policy of go slow in rounding up the Taliban leaders operating from bases in Pakistan will continue. It is a firm conviction of some Pakistani generals that it is necessary to assist the Taliban because when the US pulls out of Afghanistan, it will leave the Indians as Karzai's major prop.
- Whether Pakistan will get over its present problems without a civil war or a takeover by pro-Taliban elements is an open question. The army will be the final arbiter of Pakistan's future but whether it will be able to cope with the multiple challenges it faces today is yet not clear; the biggest challenge of course comes from the jihadi onslaught with global links; the civil unrest that may escalate sharply to become a simmering civil war; and an unending military involvement in Balochistan and Northwest Frontier areas.
- There are no easy answers to the chaotic situation developing in Pakistan. It is evident that the jihadi insurgents of Pakistan will not give up their fight for an Islamic state or strict sharia laws and will continue to confront Pakistani forces both militarily and politically. The assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the confrontation at Lal Masjid, the frustrating stalemate in FATA, and almost total loss of control in Swat show that the al Qaeda and Taliban have highly motivated and trained cadres who can prove more than a match for the Pakistan army in their own areas even in set piece battles. The secular parties have little or no influence where jihadi militants rule the roost. The secular parties cannot be expected to play any meaningful role in reducing the influence of the radical groups over the local population.
- The militants are not interested in acquiring wealth or high political posts but want to establish an Islamic republic based in Islamabad. They want a truly Islamic state in Pakistan that can influence or coerce Muslim dominated areas like Kashmir and some other parts of India to join them in the global jihadi movement. They also want to get hold of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal to threaten and blackmail countries which may challenge their ambitious Islamic projects.
- The Pakistan army has yet to demonstrate that it has the will and the capability to develop a comprehensive strategy to ward off the jihadi challenge. The operations conducted by the Pakistan army in the recent past in Waziristan, Swat and elsewhere show a singular lack of imagination to deal with the jihadis and their political agenda. Areas that were known for their Sufi culture are now under the control of Islamist fanatics and the Pakistan army is almost a helpless spectator unable to defeat the jihadis. According to press reports, the Pakistan army operations have only created refugees and killed innocent civilians; if the present situation is any guide, evidently the Pakistan army's actions have merely strengthened the hold of the jihadi groups and led to increased recruitment in the ranks of jihadi militants.
- Musharraf, much like the Shah of Iran who was toppled in 1979 by an Islamic revolution, seems unable to see the political realities; he may also meet a similar fate if he sticks to power and fails to read the writing on the wall. This may not have mattered much if this was merely an internal problem of Pakistan but with the radicals waiting to gain supremacy it can create an explosive situation in the entire South Asian region.

* This paper was written before the assassination of Benazir Bhutto on December 27, 2007, at Rawalpindi.

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