

Causes of Jihadi Militancy in FATA and Swat areas of Pakistan

Bloomsbury Pakistan organised an event entitled, ‘Causes of Jihadi Militancy in FATA and Swat areas of Pakistan’ on July 1 2015. The speaker was Dr Asad Sayeed.

The talk aimed to give a social-political analysis of the rise of violent extremism in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Swat, both parts of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province of Pakistan. Both areas have also seen significant military operations by the state with relatively greater success in Swat. Dr Sayeed noted that the discussion of FATA will draw upon a chapter ("Institutional Basis of Militancy in Tribal Areas of Pakistan") he has co-authored with Haris Gazdar and Yasser Kureshi in the book, *Civil Wars in South Asia*. (2014). Analysis of the situation in Swat will be largely based on field research he carried out in the area in 2013.

Dr Sayeed stressed that his analysis concentrates on bringing out the underlying social, economic and historical transformations which created conditions for the rise of militancy in both these areas. This talk will attempt to highlight that although there are similarities in the impact of militancy in the two regions, the underlying causes are significantly different. This historical and ethnographic approach challenges the widespread popular explanation – the prevailing myth – which presents the Pakhtun tribes as extraordinarily committed to their traditional values and militancy as their response to the destruction of tribal values and Pakhtunkhwa code of honour by an international conglomerate of forces under the banner of ‘war on terror’.

Beginning with FATA, Dr Sayeed noted that traditional modes of economy and governance in the area – which gave central role to tribal chieftains - were transformed by the British colonial intervention which established indirect rule through the creation of the office of a political agent (PA). Supported by Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR), the political agent was the uncrowned king of the region, conferring patronage to *Maliks*, the local lineage based elites. In a region with only 7% cultivable land, there were very few income generating activities. The political agent was thus able to inject substantial resources through state support to Maliks, thereby controlling sources of rent in the region. FCR involves a series of legal provisions dating back to the last quarter of the nineteenth century, developed primarily to control local population and to maintain the region as a buffer zone between the rest of India (and now Pakistan) and central Asia. This arrangement was continued by the state of Pakistan after 1947.

The colonial (and post-colonial) governance system went through major changes in 1960s as new sources of rent and economic activities began to emerge. These were a) the infrastructure development projects, particularly the new roads that linked FATA to the rest of the country and which initiated new forms of industrial and commercial activities and b) the labour migration to Gulf and the resulting inflow of money in the form of remittances. A major impact of these changes was that the region’s dependence on the financial resources from the state via the political agent reduced. This economic integration of the region should have been accompanied with political integration as well. But this did not happen. As middle classes began to emerge, the long held grievance against the dictatorial modes of governance

through FCR sought new outlets. This is where the religious discourse in the form of Deobandi Islam began to take hold. The Deobandi connection with the region goes back several decades but it acquired a new life with the changes in economic structures. The mullah who hitherto was a minor political player began to offer the Shariah as an alternative to the existing regime and created hopes for a just and prosperous society. In time, the Mullah became a challenge to the PA-Malik nexus of power.

The transformation of economic structures and the rise of mullah's power is well captured in the case study of Mullah Nur Muhammad, as detailed in the chapter that Dr. Sayeed has co-authored noted above (see pp. 174ff). Among other things, the Mullah's rise brought in the idea of religion as solution to social problems and the use of *takfiri* discourse as a tool for mobilization. Though the rise of Mullah Nur Muhammad was halted through the intervention of army on behalf of the political agent thus restoring, by explicit use of force, the old nexus of power, the underlying macro changes continued. The tense equilibrium would have lasted but all of this changed in 1979 onwards when, as part of its response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Pakistani state, effectively the army, used mullahs for Afghan Jihad. The passing years saw further strengthening of religious ideologies and accompanying violence and the decline of both the PA-Malik authority and the state's control. The influx of fighters from other parts of the world added an international dimension and further weakened the state's control of the regions. In short, as far as FATA is concerned we can note that there are immediate as well as distant causes that have come together to create an environment in which militancy found hospitable reception.

The presentation then moved to the discussion of Swat – an inland area with a very different history and trajectory into militancy. Swat was a princely state until 1969 when the state of Pakistan annexed it. In 1975 the valley was put under PATA rules, Provincially Administered Tribal Areas. This did not bring any new economic activities but added a new source of rent to political elite of the region.

The turning point in the region's move towards militancy is seen by many as 1994 when members of *Tahreek Nifaz-e-Shariate-Muhammadi*, an organisation created by Mullah Sufi Muhammad, captured Mingora airport. Educated in a madrasah in Swat and then in Swabi's Panjpiri madrasah, Sufi Muhammad did not belong to Swat but came from Dir district. He then joined Jamat-e-Islami and in 1987 became a councillor. Legend has it that General Zia prayed behind him. In 1989, Sufi Muhammad started his campaign for the implementation of Shariah.

It is in this backdrop that the Supreme Court of Pakistan annulled PATA regulations in 1994, which in turn, created a political vacuum in the region. It has been argued that this gave Sufi Muhammad the political space to assert his authority which he did by taking over Mingora airport. At this point, the state establishment realised the threats to their interest posed by Sufi Muhammad and retaliated by arresting him. However, his influence continued and when after September 2001, the US invaded Afghanistan, Sufi Muhammad was allowed to go there with a force of 10,000. The move was a disaster as almost the entire force was massacred; Sufi Mohammad was arrested upon his return and put in a jail in Punjab.

Mullah Sufi's place was taken by his son-in-law Mullah Fazlullah, also known as Mullah Radio. He used his media to disseminate three messages: religious piety; education and jobs

for boys and resolution of land disputes. He procured money to create a large madrasah and gathered militants around it. His movement became violent in 2007 and by 2008, 90% of Swat was under his control. In May 2009, army operation started but Mullah Fazlullah escaped to Afghanistan. Swat is now experiencing a nominal degree of peace.

Scholars have provided various explanations for the success of the two Mullahs. One explanation sees the political and institutional vacuum created in 1994 as the backdrop to the rise of extremism. This may be a useful idea as an immediate cause but does not explain the gradual success of Sufi Muhammad prior to 1994. The second explanation essentially sees the rise of militancy as a form of class war. There is some cogency in this explanation as land grabbing has been a feature of Swat since it became a princely state in 1917. However, a third explanation observes that class wars also do not fully explain the events as the Mullahs often worked with moneyed class who supported them. The main targets of militancy were the ANP supported elites as well as sectarian rivals such as the Barelvis.

Yet another explanation is that militancy in Swat was extraneously driven. There is literature which points to the support provided by elements in the ISI and in civil bureaucracy, in particular a commissioner of Malakand division, as part of their policy of conducting covert operations in Kashmir. This is further corroborated by the fact that an ISI major appears to have facilitated Sufi Muhammad's interactions with Kashmiri fighters such as Maulana Masood Azhar in the early 1990s. Moreover, the army had been posted in Swat since 2007 but the takeover by Mullah Fazlullah took place in their presence. It was only when national and international concern increased to alarming levels that the army decisively acted to wrest state control back from the Fazlullah led Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

The talk was followed by a lively question and answer session in which three important points were made. First was that the myth of the Pakhtun as noble savages fighting for their honour has to be disbanded as it neglects both the socio-economic factors –noted above – and is based on a distorted sense of history (for example, that Pakhtun's were never subjugated militarily). Second, it was noted that Pakistan's involvement in Afghanistan in post 1979 era has to be situated in a much longer history of rivalry between the two countries. The role of India in the geo-politics must be seen in the context of this long standing rivalry. Third, going forward the Promethean nature of challenges need to be recognised. Solutions will require integration of FATA and Swat both economically and politically in the larger state of Pakistan and genuine efforts to create social mobility to realise human aspirations.

What can we draw from this comparative study? First, rise of militancy can only be fully explained if a variety of historical, economic and religious factors are taken into account. Ideologies emerge and are sustained by underlying socio-economic conditions which have roots in history and political decisions. Second, modernisation creates aspirations – both economic and political. Often states are willing to make economic changes to go with these aspirations but fail to bring in the required political changes. This was obvious in both the case studies. In time, these aspirations seek new avenues and religion – particularly because of the close association of state and faith in Muslim past – often provides this outlet. Third, the solutions can only be long term and would require a multi-dimensional approach establishing political trust, social mobility, economic integration and transformation in religious education.