

On The Long Road To Freedom Finally

TWO EVENTS in the last three months have radically changed the course of Indo-Pak relations, and have the potential to radically alter the future direction of South Asian history.

The first of these events took place on November 24, 2007. On this day, a suicide bomber detonated himself beside a bus at the entrance of Camp Hamza, the ISI

Islamabad headquarters. Around twenty people died in what is the first known attack by an Islamist cell against the Pakistan intelligence services. Many of the dead were ISI staffers. This event, coming as it did after three assassination attempts on General Musharraf, several other bomb attacks on army barracks, and the murder of many captured army personnel in Waziristan, is credited with persuading even the most pro-Islamist elements in the Pakistan army, and the agencies, that the jihadi Frankenstein

In such a struggle it is rapidly becoming clear that India, far from being an enemy, could potentially become a future ally.

Pakistan analysts, especially those who deal with the shadowy and ambiguous world of the intelligence agencies, rarely agree on much; but on this radical shift of attitudes there is a growing consensus. Shuja Nawaz is a Washington-based specialist on the Pakistani army who comes from a prominent and well-connected military family and who has recently completed an important book on the army, *Crossed Swords*, based on extensive interviews. According to Nawaz

Cohen thinks that Musharraf and his men had anyway long been wishing to soothe the principal irritant between the two countries, the dispute in Kashmir. Musharraf, says Cohen, is convinced that India would never relinquish the Valley, and now supports a process that will allow the Kashmiris a greater say in their own future. As a result of this assessment, cross-border infiltration into Indian Kashmir and border incidents are at their lowest level for years, and in response to this both countries have recently been quietly reducing troops numbers around the Line of Control: the Indian army has withdrawn at least one division and sent it to the border with China; the Pakistanis have likewise withdrawn a division of their own, and sent it to deal with counterinsurgency duties on the North West Frontier.

The fact that both India and Pakistan now possess nuclear weapons is also credited with perchanging strategic thinking in the Pakistani army. According to Cohen, the generals understand that no one can be a winner in a nuclear exchange, and that all-out war between the two countries is increasingly improbable, giving an increased incentive to the Pakistanis to improve relations with their potential nuclear nemesis.

Finally, the army, like everyone else in Pakistan, has been both shocked and impressed by India

The Pakistanis showed that they wanted the ability to choose their own rulers, and to determine their own future. To ensure this they voted for a major change that would send the military back to their barracks and the mullahs back to their mosques.

For Pakistani liberals, 2007 was a disaster. Musharraf started the year by sacking the Chief Justice, accusing him of using his position for personal gain. Any optimism felt at the lawyers

Nawaz Sharif to Saudi Arabia after his brief return from exile, and the subsequent declaration of Emergency by President Musharraf. The crises reached a climax in December with the assassination of Benazir Bhutto. All this led many to predict that Pakistan was looking more and more like a failed State stumbling towards full scale civil war and, possibly, even disintegration. The cruel contrast with India, then widely being celebrated as a future democratic superpower on its 60th birthday, was not lost on the Pakistani middle class.

Yet the widespread publicity given to Pakistan

The Pakistani economy may currently be in difficulties, with fast rising inflation and shortages of gas, electricity and flour; but between 2002 and 2006, it had been growing almost as strongly as that of India. For five years, until the beginning of 2007, Pakistan enjoyed a construction and consumer boom, with growth approaching 8 percent and what was briefly the fastest-rising stock market in Asia.

The country I saw last week on a long road trip from Lahore down through rural Sindh to Karachi was very far from a failed State. Nor was it anything even approaching

Spectator (among many others) recently suggested. Instead, as you travel around Pakistan today you can see the effects of the recent economic

boom everywhere: in new shopping malls and restaurant complexes, on hoardings for the latest laptops and ipods, in the cranes and buildings sites, in the smart roadside filling stations and the smokestacks of the factories; in the new 4x4s jamming the roads and in the endless stores selling mobile phones. In 2003, the country had fewer than three million cell-phone users; today apparently there are almost 50 million, while car ownership has been increasing at roughly 40 percent per year since 2001. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has risen from \$322 million in 2002 to \$3.5 billion in 2006.

It is true that on my trip there were pockets of great poverty and frequent shortages of electricity. At one point, I was told that I shouldn't

Pakistan still has the best airports, motorway and road network in the region. Driving last week along the dual carriageways of Sindh, a week after bumping through rural Rajasthan, there was no comparison between the roads on either side of the border.

The cities of Pakistan, in particular, are fast changing beyond recognition. As in India, there is a burgeoning Pakistani fashion scene full of ambitious gay designers and some amazingly beautiful models. There are also remarkable things happening in the world of books: as well as a fine crop of major non-fiction writers

English-language fiction, with fine writers like Kamila Shamsie, Nadeem Aslam, Daniyal Mueenuddin, Moni Mohsin, Ali Sethi and especially this year's Booker short-listee, Mohsin Hamid, all for the first time giving their Indian counterparts a run for their money.

Recently, Hamid, author of the bestseller *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, wrote about this. Having lived abroad as a banker in New York and London, he returned home to Lahore to find the country unrecognisable. He was particularly struck by

But I had not until then realised how profoundly things had changed. Not just television, but also private radio stations and newspapers have flourished in Pakistan over the past few years. The result is an unprecedented openness. Young people are speaking and dressing differently. The *Vagina Monologues* was recently performed on stage in Pakistan to standing ovations.

Little of this has been reported in the Indian press, and Indians generally seem remarkably ill informed about the changes which have been quietly but profoundly changing Pakistani society beneath the media image of military stagnation and jihadi terrorism.

IT WAS this newly enriched and empowered urban middle class that showed its political muscle and will for the first time with the lawyers movement

Punjab-based faction of the Muslim League, the PML-N. This is a solidly urban party, popular among exactly the sort of middle class voters in the Punjab who have benefited most from the economic success of the last decade, and who have since found that status threatened by the recent economic slowdown and the sudden steep price rise in food, fuel and electricity. The same is true of the success of the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM), the Karachi-based Mohajir party, which also did unexpectedly well: like the PML-N, it is an urban-based regional party attractive to middle class voters.

This seems to be the pattern of the future: Pakistan now has almost a 50 percent urban population, and the centre of gravity is shifting from the countryside to the large cities, leaving the rural and feudal-dominated Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) looking increasingly like the party of the past. For all that the PPP won the largest number of seats in the election, its performance was well below expectation, which is one reason why feudals such as Zardari remain frightened by the growing clout of middle class urban figures in its own ranks such as Aitzaz Ahsan. Ahsan commands a large following in the cities following his work with the lawyers movement a movement Bhutto and Zardari kept a telling distance from.

This rise of the middle class was most clear in the number of winning candidates who came for the first time largely from middle class backgrounds. In Jhang district of the rural Punjab, for example, as many as 10 of the 11 elected are from middle class backgrounds: sons of revenue officers, senior policemen, functionaries in the civil bureaucracy and so on, rather than the usual feudal zamindars. This would have been unthinkable ten years ago.

The Punjab is the most developed part of rural Pakistan; but even in backward Sindh there are signs of change. Khairpur, on the banks of the Indus, is the heartland of exactly the sort of unreformed landowners who epitomise the stereotype painted by Pakistani sophisticates when they roll their eyes and talk about

PhD on honour killings at Oxford. She is standing in the same constituency as Sadruddin Shah who is often held up as the archetype of feudal excess, and who goes electioneering with five pick-up trucks full of his private militia armed with pump-action shotguns.

As you drive along the bypass, his face, complete with Dick Dastardly moustache, sneers down from hoardings placed every fifty yards along the road.

Last week, the local Sindhi press was full of stories of his men shooting at crowds of little boys shouting pro-Benazir slogans. Shah was standing as usual for no less than three different seats; this time however, the Oxford PhD student and her other PPP allies have all but wiped out Shah and his fellow candidates of the PML-Functional, so that Shah himself won only in his own hometown.

Even the most benign feudal lords suffered astonishing reverses last week. Mian Najibuddin Owaisi was not just the popular feudal lord of the village of Khanqah Sharif in the southern Punjab, he was also the *sajada nasheen*, the descendant of the local Sufi saint, and so regarded as a holy man as well as the local landowner. But recently Najibuddin made the ill-timed switch from supporting Nawaz Sharif

PML-N to the pro-Musharraf Q-league. Talking to the people in the bazaar before the election, his followers announced that that they did not like Musharraf, but they would still vote for their landlord:

Prices are rising, said Hajji Sadiq, the cloth salesman, sitting amid bolts of textiles. There is less and less electricity and gas.

And what was done to Benazir was quite wrong, agreed his friend Salman.

But Najib sahib is our protector, said the Hajji. Whatever party he chooses, we will vote for him. Even the Q-league.

Why? I asked.

Because, with him in power we have someone we can call if we are in trouble with the police, or need someone to speak to the administration.

When we really need him, he looks after us. We vote according to local issues only. Who cares about parties?

Because of Najibuddin

Musharraf feudals and he polled 46,000 votes. But he still lost, to an independent candidate from a non-feudal middle-class background named Amir Varan, who took 57,000 votes and ousted the Owaisi family from control of the constituency for the first time since they entered politics in the elections of 1975.

AS WELL as a middle-class victory over a feudal past, in the west of the country, the election also saw an important vote for secularism over the religious parties. In the last election of October 2002, thanks partly to their closeness to the ruling military government, the Islamist *Muttedha Majlis Amal* (or MMA) alliance succeeded in more than doubling its representation from 4 to 11.6 percent, and sweeping the polls in Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). They went on to form ultra-conservative and pro-Islamist provincial governments.

This time however, the MMA has been comprehensively defeated by the Awami National Party: the remnant of the secular and non-violent Gandhian Pashtun Red Shirt movement. This was originally led by Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, an important ally of Gandhi during the 1920s and 30s. Locked up by a succession of Pakistani generals after Independence, thanks to his opposition to the creation of Pakistan

ANP has routed the Islamists, demonstrating that contrary to their stereotype as bearded bastions of Islamist orthodoxy, the Pashtuns are in fact as wary as anyone else of violence, extremism and instability, and want their politicians to deliver competent and honest government. The ANP is arguably the single party in Pakistan that has done most to speak out for peace and good relations with India

Amid all the euphoric celebration across Pakistan over this election result, three big question marks still remain. The first is the power of the jihadis. Though the religious parties were routed in the election, their gunwielding brothers in Waziristan are not obviously in retreat. In recent months these militants have won a series of notable military victories over the Pakistani army, and spread their revolt within the settled areas of Pakistan proper. The two assassination attempts on Benazir

Musharraf are just the tip of the iceberg. Every bit as alarming is the degree to which the jihadis move freely through much of the North West region of Pakistan. The Swat Valley in particular is still smouldering following the assault by government troops on jihadis loyal to the insurgent leader, Maulana Fazlullah

PML-Q, has been heavily defeated at the polls, leaving him vulnerable to impeachment by the new parliament, the Pakistani army is still formidably powerful. Normally countries have an army; in Pakistan, as in Burma, the army has a country. In her recent book, *Military, Inc.*, the political scientist

Ayesha Siddiqi attempted to put figures on the degree to which the army controls Pakistan irrespective of who is in power.

Siddiqi estimated, for example, that the Army now controls business assets of around 20 billion dollars and a third of all the manufacturing in the country; it also owns 12 million acres of public land and up to 7 percent of Pakistan

The new army chief, General Ashfaq Kayani, who took over when Musharraf stepped down from his military role last year, seems to recognise this. He has issued statements about his wish to pull the army back from civilian life, ordering his soldiers to stay out of politics and give up jobs in the bureaucracy. He has also ordered that no army officer may meet with President Musharraf without his personal sanction.

The third major issue facing the country is its desperate educational crisis. This is something that has festered as much under military rule as that of the democrats. No problem in Pakistan casts such a long shadow over its future than the abject failure of the government to educate more than a fraction of its own people: at the moment a mere 1.8 percent of Pakistan

GDP is spent on government schools. The statistics are dire: 15 percent of these government schools are without a proper building; 52 percent without a boundary wall; 71 percent without electricity. This was graphically confirmed by a survey conducted two years ago by Imran Khan, in his own constituency of Mianwalli. His research showed that 20 percent of government schools supposed to be functioning in his constituency did not exist at all, a quarter had no teachers, and 70 percent were closed. No school had more than half of the teachers it was meant to have. This education gap is the single most striking way in which Pakistan is lagging behind India: in India 65 percent of the population is literate, and the number rises every year. But in Pakistan the literacy figure is under half (it is currently 49 percent) and falling.

The virtual collapse of government schooling has meant that many of the country

Taliban and the growth of sectarian violence; it is also true that the education provided by many madarasas is often wholly inadequate to equip children for modern life in a civil society.

YET, FOR all these problems, there is real room for optimism, both for the future of civil society in Pakistan and for its relations with India.

Pakistan will not change overnight. Much violence and unrest no doubt lie ahead. The current wrangling between Asif Zardari and Nawaz Sharif show that Pakistani politicians have lost none of their ability to shoot the democratic project in the foot; it has taken consistent political incompetence on the part of the democrats to give the generals the opportunity to intervene decade after decade. But it is clear Pakistan is not about to fall apart, nor implode, nor break out into civil war, nor succumb to an Islamist insurgency, nor become a Taliban state with truckfuls of mullahs pouring down on Islamabad from the Khyber Pass, as some of the more alarmist media predicted on the death of Benazir. Instead, it is now a country with an increasingly powerful middle class that badly wants to do business and to make peace with India.

Contrary to the general impression in India, in my experience Pakistanis do not harbour any ill will to Indians

Indian visitors to Pakistan. Certainly, it is possible to meet the odd mullah or general for whom India is an inherently evil place, but for most Pakistanis, India is a complicated country that they admire as much they fear. Pakistanis love Bollywood films, fantasise over Indian actors and actresses, and watch Indian satellite TV. Posters of Indian cricketers and actresses are on sale in every bazaar. India is, in short, more a source of feelings of envy than an object of hatred, although its enormous military superiority and its domination of the Kashmir Valley are genuine sources of anxiety. In all the 20 years I have covered Pakistan, I have almost never sat at a Pakistani dinner party without being asked about the differences between the two countries: Is there any way in which Pakistan is preferable? Aren

As a Scot, the small and often forgotten neighbour to the north of onetime superpower England, I recognise the anxieties well.

Recently, as Pakistan had gone through one of the worst periods in its history, admiration for India has become more pronounced and far more openly expressed. People now talk about India with growing respect, admiring both the maturity of India

Taken together with the seismic shift in strategic thinking in the Pakistani army, the new scenario offers the best hope for improved Indo-Pak relations in a generation. It is surely time for India, as well as Pakistan, to reach out and seize this new opportunity for peace, and end 60 years of pointless, expensive, unnecessary and entirely damaging conflict.

William Dalrymple

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