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Pakistan's Struggle for Modernity

The country's voters have never endorsed religious extremism.

By [FOUAD AJAMI](#)

The drama of the Swat Valley -- its cynical abandonment to the mercy of the Taliban, the terror unleashed on it by the militants, then the recognition that the concession to the forces of darkness had not worked -- is of a piece with the larger history of religious extremism in the world of Islam. Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari was the latest in a long line of secularists who cut deals with the zealots, only to discover that for the believers in political Islam these deals are at best a breathing spell before the fight for their utopia is taken up again.

The decision by Pakistan to retrieve the ground it had ceded to the Taliban was long overdue. We should not underestimate the strength of the Pakistani state, and of the consensus that underpins it. The army is a huge institution, and its mandate is like that of the Turkish army, which sees itself as a defender of secular politics.

The place of Islam in Pakistani political culture has never been a simple matter. It was not religious piety that gave birth to Pakistan. The leaders who opted for separation from India were a worldly, modern breed who could not reconcile themselves to political subservience in a Hindu-ruled India. The Muslims had fallen behind in the race to modernity, and Pakistan was their consolation and their shelter.

Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, was secular through and through. The pillars of his political life had been British law and Indian nationalism. Both had given way, and he set out for his new state, in 1947, an ailing old man, only to die a year later. He was sincere in his belief that Pakistan could keep religion at bay.

Jinnah's vision held sway for three decades. It was only in the late 1970s that political Islam began its assault against the secular edifice. A military dictator, Zia ul-Haq, had seized power in 1977; he was to send his predecessor, the flamboyant populist Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, to the gallows. Zia was to recast Pakistan's political culture. It was during his decade in power that the madrassas, the religious schools, proliferated. (There had been no more than 250 madrassas in 1947. There would be a dozen times as many by 1988, and at least 12,000 by latest count.)

Zia had been brutally effective in manipulating the jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union. His country was awash with guns and Saudi and American money. He draped his despotism in Islamic garb. He made room for the mullahs and the mullahs brought the gunmen with them.

Say what you will about the ways of Pakistan, its people have never voted for the darkness that descended on Swat and its surroundings. In the national elections of 2008 the secular and regional parties had carried the day; the fundamentalists were trounced at the polls. The concessions in Swat were a gift the militants had not earned.

The preachers and the gunmen who brought their reign of terror to Swat made no secret of what they wanted. Sufi Mohamed, the radical cleric who cut the deal on behalf of the militants, was clear about his project. He, and his gunmen, would define the true nature of the faith. They would separate the true Muslims from the "apostates" in their midst. They would replace the system of justice with Shariah law. They would restrict the access of women to the public space. They would war openly against democracy, declaring it a godless innovation at odds with Islam. The

conquest of Swat was to be a message to the populace: The writ of the Pakistani state, its monopoly on order, had been broken. The battle was joined, for the very legitimacy of the Pakistani army had been at stake.

In the 1980s, Pakistan led to Afghanistan, and to the final battle of the Cold War. Nowadays, the struggle in Afghanistan leads back to Pakistan, and for a battle on behalf of Muslim modernity. The stakes in Pakistan for the U.S. are vital. Its population is at least six times as large as that of Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, the question of the Taliban is a tribal one. The strident religion is a vehicle for Pashtun resentment and ambitions. Afghanistan is a relative stranger to the doctrines of political Islam that have been blowing through the Middle East and the subcontinent for decades.

America travels light into this region. South Asia has not been a place of American imperial reach. We barely took notice of Pakistan when political Islam began its march there, for we once thought that the religious reactionaries could be managed and contained.

We have a new American president, but we have yet to figure out the new American mission in Pakistan. The Democrats had had a simple approach to Pakistan: It had been wrong, they insisted, to embrace the dictatorial Gen. Pervez Musharraf, for he had taken our treasure but had not severed the ties of his intelligence services to the religious extremists within his country and in Afghanistan. Gen. Musharraf is gone, but no redemption has come.

In his days on the stump, candidate Barack Obama had maintained that he would begin with active diplomacy over the long-standing Pakistani-Indian dispute over Kashmir. But by any reckoning, India's weight and power preclude taking up that question. No government in New Delhi would countenance any change in the status in Kashmir.

In truth, the U.S. can't alter the balance of power between India and Pakistan. For six decades now, Pakistan has lived in the shadow of India's success. This has tormented Pakistanis and helped radicalize their politics. The obsession with the unfinished business of partition (Kashmir) has been no small factor in the descent of Pakistan into religious and political extremism. The choice for Pakistan can be starkly put: the primacy of Kashmir in political life or the repair of the country, the renewal of its institutions, and the urgent task of putting in place an educational system that would undercut the power of the religious reactionaries.

In his desire to be the un-Bush, President Obama seems bent on waging this war in the "AfPak theater" without ennobling it, without giving it a name or a stirring call. We are not to see this struggle through the lens of the "long war" against jihadism and Islamism, for this would give vindication to the way George W. Bush saw the world in the aftermath of 9/11. Besides, we had declared that war done and over with, a great overreach.

By the Obama administration's practice and admonition, we are not to see the ideological trail from the Middle East to South Asia that has put the world of Islam and its fragile modernism in great peril. Ours is a stealth campaign. We want to "degrade, dismantle, and defeat" al Qaeda, deny it the ability to do us harm. In Afghanistan, and in the Pashtun belt in Pakistan, we wish to separate the "reconcilables" of the Taliban from al Qaeda and the forces of the global jihad. But the people themselves, we hold at arm's length. We are not to invest ourselves in their affairs in the way George W. Bush invested himself in the reform and freedom of the Greater Middle East.

For a man of words, a bestselling author at that, the reticence of Mr. Obama about the stakes in this struggle is odd and bewildering. Ideology is "so yesterday," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently said, telling us volumes about our current diplomatic practice. So for Mr. Obama, it was two days in Turkey -- which has hectored us now for the full length of a decade and given voice to the most malignant fantasies of anti-Americanism -- and four hours in Camp Victory. Under Mr. Obama we are not to embrace the Iraqis, and claim the victory we won there and the decent democratic example we implanted on so unpromising a soil. In the same vein, we are to "do Pakistan," but clinically, without giving a name to the dangers that attend it or to the better heritage we should be calling it to.

For so pragmatic a people, Americans have done best when called to great undertakings. It is not enough to carry to this contested landscape in South Asia the cold-bloodedness of the so-called foreign policy realists.

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