
Pakistan Through the Lens of the “Triple A” Theory

HASSAN ABBAS

Pakistan is, in many ways, a mysterious country. Predictions about its future range from a model of a progressive, democratic Muslim country positively influencing the Islamic world to the prospect of an advanced and more deadly version of yesteryear’s Talibanized Afghanistan. A nuclear-armed country of 150 million Muslims with well-entrenched religious political parties, ruled by an “enlightened and moderate” dictator who happens to be the chief of the country’s army, Pakistan is also one of the most important U.S. allies in the war on terror. The country is unique in that it has enjoyed the best of relations with the United States during different phases of its history, but it is also considered a potential foreign policy nightmare by American analysts.¹

This article endeavors to help readers understand the shifting fortunes of Pakistan. Rather than employing political science theories or borrowing Jared Diamond’s thesis from his latest book, *Collapase: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, I intend to make use of a popular hypothesis in Pakistan—the influence of the three As (Allah, the Army, and America)—that defines and directs Pakistan.² According to this theory, Allah’s support is at work in matters that are incomprehensible to the naked eye—for instance, Pakistan’s very existence despite dismal economic and political development and the presence of powerful enemies. The most potent force managing and often manipulating the affairs of the state, whether in ways lawful or not, is Pakistan’s army. For everything else that has gone wrong, ranging from palace intrigue to “choreographed” political instability to

Hassan Abbas is a doctoral candidate at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, and a fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. He is also author of *Pakistan’s Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army and America’s War on Terror*.

assassination of the country's leaders, the United States of America is considered to be responsible.

For a student of Pakistan's history, it is not very difficult to establish that the triple A theory has its merits. However, the hypothesis needs updates or additions to reflect that the history of Pakistan is also a history of cover-ups, conspiracy theories, and a dream gone sour. Still, the most intriguing question remains: how has a state whose founding fathers were secular people who believed in rule of law and democracy drifted toward religious extremism and authoritarianism? Three statements are a measure

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of this shift. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the father of the nation, while addressing the first meeting of Pakistan's Constituent Assembly on August 11, 1947, said:

"You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed;

that has nothing to do with the business of the State. . . . We are starting with this fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one State."³

The extent to which Pakistan diverged from the spirit of the words of its great leader is the real measure of the tragedy. Three decades later, General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq, a military dictator ruling Pakistan, declared: "Take Islam out of Pakistan, and make it a secular state; it will collapse."⁴

In line with this worldview and to create a political constituency for himself, Zia introduced dogmatic and controversial religious laws and steered the state toward theocracy. Consequently, this approach, coupled with the Pakistan military's involvement in the Afghan *jihad*, created extremists like Hafiz Saeed, leader of Pakistan's most lethal and extensive religious militant group, Lashkar-e-Taiba (Army of the Pure), who maintains: "We believe in Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilization and we will not rest until Islam becomes the dominant religion."⁵

Of course, Jinnah was a very popular national leader and General Zia a military dictator, while Saeed's support base is much thinner in comparison. Yet Pakistan's official support to sectarian terrorist groups within Pakistan in the 1990s and to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan until 2001

sufficiently indicates that some elements within the country's leadership believe in Saeed's philosophy. This is exactly where the trouble lies. Another symptom of this malaise became apparent in the 2002 national elections when conservative religious political parties entered the legislature in unprecedented numbers, gaining 11 percent of the vote. Sectarian killings and terrorist activity also continue unabatedly within Pakistan.⁶

My research (conducted for the book *Pakistan's Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army and America's War on Terror*) convinces me that there were three primary factors that led Pakistan down this path: a powerful military that operates independently, the mushrooming of religious militant groups, and the hydra-headed monster that is the intelligence services.

A POWERFUL MILITARY, OPERATING INDEPENDENTLY

Today, Pakistan's army stands as the most powerful, organized, and resourceful institution in the country. It has both directly and indirectly managed the country's affairs for more than half the period since its independence. On four different occasions—in 1958, 1969, 1977, and 1999—army chiefs dislodged civilian governments and imposed martial law. Though these were bloodless coups, the ousted political leaders invariably landed in jail, and one of them, who also happened to be a very popular elected leader, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was executed. Why these events happened is a question that can only be answered by briefly making a reference to the circumstances under which the country was created.

When Pakistan emerged as a sovereign state in August 1947, it brought together disparate Muslim-majority provinces of the former British colony, India, whose only unity lay in the insecurity engendered by fear of Hindu domination. The only two institutions that had some infrastructure and organization were the imperial bureaucracy and the military. Massive violence on the eve of independence in the form of Hindu-Muslim riots, along with India-Pakistan confrontation in the disputed land of Kashmir from day one, ensured Pakistan's dependence on its military to secure its borders and to manage internal law and order.

Inexperienced and selfish political leadership following the death of Jinnah in 1948 and the assassination of the first prime minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, in 1951, failed to devise a constitution in the formative years, thereby weakening the legitimacy of the political system. For a brief stint between 1954 and 1957, the bureaucracy benefited from the politicians'

credibility gap. The army finally moved in to take charge of the situation in 1958, and it has never looked back.

Nonetheless, insecurity and the failure of politicians were not the decisive factors behind the rise of the military. The U.S.-Pakistan military partnership also played a crucial role in this development. Beginning in 1953 and 1954, the United States, in its effort to build an alliance in the region against possible Soviet expansionism, signed several military agreements with Pakistan. Consequently, major military assistance flowed into

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the country. Commander-in-Chief of the Pakistan Army, General Ayub Khan, had already made a commitment to U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Henry Byroad in 1953: “Our army can be your army if you want us.”⁷ The country itself

was also hugely investing in the modernization of its armed forces in the face of Indian military buildup. The net result was a powerful military establishment that started setting its own rules above the law of the land. The instructions given to Brigadier Ghulam Gillani, Pakistan’s first military attaché to Washington, by General Ayub Khan as early as 1952 are noteworthy. Khan told Gillani that his main task was to procure military equipment from the Pentagon, and that he need not take either Pakistan’s ambassador or foreign office into confidence, for in Khan’s view, “these civilians cannot be trusted with such sensitive matters of national security.”⁸

For the Pakistan army, the main concern was the Indian threat and the simmering Kashmir conflict, though in front of American officials they would frame the issue in terms of Pakistan’s utility as a bulwark against the Soviet bloc. Americans did not consider it convenient to suspect Pakistan’s intentions, though they always stated on the record that U.S. military hardware was not to be used during any military confrontation with India. It is not clear who was fooling whom.

The pattern continued during the 1980s through the U.S.-Pakistan collaboration in the Afghan *jihad* and is relevant even today, especially in the realm of the war on terror. The only difference between the Pakistan army of the 1950s and that of today is that it has now become “Military, Inc.” It has diversified its support base by developing corporate infrastructure in a broad swath of civilian markets, ranging from heavy industry to cereal production. Now it has also acquired the “liberty and freedom” to adopt an idea at its discretion and then throw it in the dustbin when convenient.

Supporting the Taliban’s entrenchment in Afghanistan and later supporting U.S. military action in dislodging them explains the point sufficiently. Pakistan’s army apparently operates in this manner confident in the fact that American support for such “liberty and freedom” will always be there.

MUSHROOMING OF RELIGIOUS MILITANT GROUPS

There are 245 religious parties in Pakistan, 215 with their own seminaries, according to the research of Pakistani journalist Amir Rana.⁹ Of these, 28 openly take part in politics; 104 claim to focus on *jihad*; 82 focus on sectarian concerns; and 20 parties are oriented toward *tablighi* (preaching). According to other credible reports, Pakistan has 24 armed religious extremist groups, most of which are now officially banned, though some still operate under new names.

At the state’s inception, most of the religious parties were against the very idea of Pakistan. However, as Pakistan was created in the name of Islam, the political leadership of the early years, despite being secular, often resorted to the slogan of religion to create national unity and order. The moment this slogan was out of the bag, it was up for grabs and none but the religious parties were better qualified to pick it up and take it to its natural conclusion—the call for an Islamic state with an Islamic constitution. They were unsuccessful initially, but

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were intelligent enough to decipher that there was immense room to maneuver. They began by asking for constitutional provisions declaring Islam the state religion, and with the passage of time, they raised the level and nature of their demands. Luck first smiled on them in the early 1950s, when rumors spread that leftist and socialist groups were gaining ground in Pakistan. The U.S. National Security Council’s “top secret” 1951 report maintained that “in Pakistan, the communists have acquired considerable influence in press circles among intellectuals and in certain labor unions,” and argued that domination of “Pakistan by unfriendly powers, either directly or through subservient indigenous regimes, would constitute a serious threat to the national security of the U.S.”¹⁰ To counter

communist infiltration, real or perceived, the religious parties, hitherto generally peaceful in outlook and character, started receiving support—both moral and monetary. It didn't take them long to reveal their true colors, and in the mid-1960s, some of these religious parties, Jamaat-i-Islami (Party of Islam) being the most prominent, were banned.

But the cat was out of the bag. The religious parties reframed their demands and started developing links within the military establishment and intelligence organizations. In 1970 and 1971, the religious parties were hand-in-glove with the army during the brutal military operation in East Pakistan, when Bengalis, allegedly aided and abetted by Indians, were up in arms. Jamaat-i-Islami tried its best to convince Bengalis that their loyalties lay first with Islam (and therefore Pakistan) and then with their ethnic roots, but to little avail. Soon, Bengalis were declared to be the "enemies of Islam," and thousands of them paid the price for it. Indeed, they were honorable people, who refused to live under the military authoritarian regime run by West Pakistanis (mostly Punjabis and Pathans). Pakistan's army was guilty of disproportionate use of force against unarmed civilians in this crisis, but Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger remained conspicuously silent. There was a reason for that—behind the scenes, Pakistan was busy opening up a secret U.S.-China diplomatic channel.

Religious parties were gradually becoming entrenched, though their vote bank remained small. In the national elections of 1971, the religious parties together gained 14 percent of the vote, but this was not translated into a comparable number of seats in the national and provincial legislatures, and their thunder was drowned out by nationalist and regional parties. Still, to keep them in good humor, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto introduced many Islamic laws in the country and supported a vote in the national assembly declaring Ahmedis, a minority sect, to be non-Muslims. This marriage of convenience was short-lived. In 1977, the religious parties joined hands and spearheaded a national movement against the prime minister in the aftermath of elections that many believed had been rigged. Being very organized in urban centers and ready to face law enforcement agencies head-on, their rallies were large and aggressive. Many died in clashes with government forces, and the movement got a further boost of energy. This was the religious parties' finest hour, as street agitation had taken on a new dimension in Pakistan—all to the benefit of these parties. The supporters of Bhutto and his popular Pakistan People's Party believed

that Bhutto was being targeted because he had refused to heed Henry Kissinger when he told Bhutto to halt Pakistan’s nuclear program or else “the U.S. will make a horrible example of him.” Conspiracy theorists believe the United States provided financial support to religious parties to get Bhutto out of office. Kissinger denies that he ever uttered the above-quoted words, but Bhutto mentioned the incident again in his book *If I Am Assassinated* . . . , written later, from his death cell. Irrespective of what really occurred between the two men, Bhutto’s version still holds ground in Pakistan.

After Bhutto, military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq remained at Pakistan’s helm through 11 years of military rule, beginning in 1977. This regime changed the political as well as religious discourse for the worse. As he had dislodged an elected government,

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Zia co-opted religious parties to run the state. He introduced controversial and contested provisions of Islamic law and presented himself to the nation as a “soldier of Islam.” While he was still settling in, suddenly the Shah of Iran was swept away in the tide of Khomeini’s revolution in 1979—catching the CIA by surprise. The Iranian revolution left an important vacancy for an American ally in the region. In another significant development, the Soviet Union moved into Afghanistan, sending shudders across the globe. Zia was well aware that as soon as the Soviets settled in Kabul, they would create trouble in Pakistan’s border provinces. It was a widely held belief then that the Soviets were, in fact, looking for a warm-water port in Karachi, the economic hub of Pakistan. At this juncture, Pakistan-U.S. relations got a new lease on life, and Pakistan became a frontline state and close American ally all over again. Pakistan’s army soon started supporting the Afghan resistance movement, and the United States ensured there was no paucity of funds, armaments, or ammunition.

This collaboration gradually changed the very nature of the Afghan resistance. “Freedom fighters” were transformed into *mujahideen* as a consequence of the joint brainstorming of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the CIA. Fighting the occupiers of one’s land was a strong enough cause, but to this was added an ideological twist. Whether it was an ISI idea that attracted the CIA or vice versa is largely irrelevant

here. It is the result with which we are concerned: the emergence of an army of religious fighters who sought to push the infidel Soviets back across the border. A *madrassa* (seminary) network was quickly established in Pakistan, financed by Saudi Arabia in order to produce new recruits for this battlefield. The children of Afghan refugees in Pakistan were the prime target of such *madrassas*, but the Saudi sponsors had another agenda as well—to support Wahhabism in Pakistan. Pakistan forgot that there is no such thing as a free lunch. In addition, many religious militants were imported from all over the Muslim world. This effort was intelligently choreographed—after all, there was no Mecca in Afghanistan that Muslims all over the world would have felt obliged to defend—and secular Arab regimes were more than happy to get rid of their own religiously motivated fighters. Pakistan's ISI was not capable of managing this on its own. The CIA was a willing partner, though in the post-September 11 phase, there has been an effort on the part of the CIA to argue that they had no clue what was happening and that they were merely channeling the funds to the ISI, according to official American policy. Three well-researched books covering this issue have been published in the last few years (George Crile's *Charlie Wilson's War*, Steve Coll's *the Ghost Wars*, and Ahmed Rashid's *Taliban*), and all three indicate that the Afghan project was a collaboration between the United States and Pakistan, with strong financial and logistical support from Saudi Arabia.

To make a long story short, in this unholy drama, Pakistan itself became radicalized. Peshawar, a city in the Northwest Frontier Province, became the strategic headquarters of the *mujahideen*, and Osama bin Laden was merely one of the field commanders based in the city. Within a decade, the Afghan and Arab *mujahideen* managed to turn the tables. American Stinger missiles were difficult for the Soviets to counter, and the continuous flow of trained and highly motivated *mujahideen* to Afghanistan showed no signs of distress or fatigue. Soviet forces in Afghanistan were compelled to return to their homeland, and the tragedy was that as soon as the Soviets left Afghanistan, the United States left the region as well.

Officials in the Reagan administration woke up to the reality that Pakistan was very close to acquiring a nuclear weapons capability and that this was contrary to declared U.S. policy. Hence, economic sanctions were imposed on Pakistan. Apparently, few in the U.S. administration gave any thought to the reality on the ground in South Asia—Pakistan now had

thousands of trained and battle-experienced *jihadis*. It is difficult to produce such warriors and ten times harder to decommission them. In addition, hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees were still living in camps in Pakistan. The cut-off of U.S. aid was seen as a breach of contract by the Pakistan army and intelligence.

The net result was that Pakistan became home to dozens of large and effective religious groups, and, for their benefit, Saudi financial support continued. Zia was assassinated in 1988, but his legal and constitutional marvels, in the shape of a dogmatic and distorted version of Islam, were well in place to haunt Pakistan for the foreseeable future.

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INTELLIGENCE SERVICES: A HYDRA-HEADED MONSTER

One organization that benefited the most in the Afghan war years was the ISI. It became a clumsy, frequently blundering, hydra-headed monster of great influence in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. Two of its contributions are worth mentioning here: the shifting of *mujahideen's* focus on Indian-controlled Kashmir and its interference with domestic politics in Pakistan in the 1990s.

After their victory in the Afghan theater, the *mujahideen* were "unemployed." The ISI, their paymaster and guardian, had two options: either allow them to operate inside Pakistan or divert their attention elsewhere. By now, a deadly civil war had ensued in Afghanistan, though only the Afghan component of the *mujahideen* force was interested and involved in that battleground. The Arab fighters and Pakistanis still had to be taken care of. Some of these opted on their own to settle sectarian battles inside Pakistan, but still many others were jobless. An indigenous movement in Indian-controlled Kashmir was already heating up in reaction to the Indian military's oppression there. For the ISI, it was an easy and convenient solution to dedicate itself to supporting the militancy in Kashmir. Within the span of a few years, dozens of militant groups with similar-sounding names emerged. The training and experience were already there—the ISI only had to brief them about the new geography of

the conflict zone and produce some *jihadi* propaganda materials relevant to Kashmir. And there was no dearth of materials, as the Indian military's brutal activities in the region were well documented by international

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human rights organizations. However, in this process, the ISI seriously damaged the Kashmiris' cause by altering its very nature from a freedom struggle to violent militancy.

In the realm of domestic politics, the ISI remained busy in dislodging governments. Benazir Bhutto, the daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who had come into power after Zia's departure in 1989, was deposed after a mere 18 months. The driving force behind the ISI continued to be the military hierarchy, but the agency was increasingly operating inde-

pendently as well. The ISI believed it was their inherent right to decide the national interest.

Since Musharraf's arrival on the national scene in October 1999, and especially in the aftermath of the September 11 terror attacks, the ISI is being forced to comply with the new rules of the game. The agency has been cleaned of undesirable elements, but many of these have now become "consultants" to the religious militant groups.

CONCLUSION: FUTURE PROSPECTS

A logical consequence of the above three factors has been the weakening of civil society groups. It is often argued in Pakistan that weak civil society is responsible for not holding the state accountable for lack of performance and not shaping it along democratic lines. The consequent institutional decay, the argument goes, is what leads to the crisis of governance in Pakistan. However, this is far from the truth. In reality, the military and religious groups together have held Pakistan hostage by framing the issues in terms of "insecurity" and "Islam in danger" slogans. There were a few democratic intervals, but politicians were not allowed a fair opportunity to prove themselves. Only a continuous democratic process could have allowed civil society to blossom and flourish. Each dollar spent on the

needs of the military meant a dollar taken away from education, health-care, or industrial infrastructure. The billions of dollars spent on procuring military hardware and developing nuclear weapons provided security only to the ruling elite. For people on the street, these policies have brought hunger, misery, and hopelessness.

General Pervez Musharraf, who declared himself president based on a constitutionally flawed referendum in 2002, is no different from previous Pakistani leaders. Though duly appreciated by the Bush administration for his significant contribution in the realm of the "war on terror," the fact remains that Musharraf is an authoritarian ruler who is more interested in strengthening the armed forces of Pakistan than in reviving democracy in the country. Arguably, if Musharraf had not sidelined liberal and mainstream political parties from national elections in 2002, the religious political parties would have had much tougher competition. U.S. support gives legitimacy to the military's role in Pakistani politics. Apparently, the current U.S. administration finds it much easier to deal with one man than an elected government. This is a shortsighted policy at best. Thus, the triple A theory will continue to dominate the minds of the Pakistani people because it is quite difficult to prove wrong.

The way forward for Pakistan is to return to true democracy. The western world in general, and the United States in particular, will be much better off investing in Pakistani democracy rather than selling Pakistan military hardware. Religious parties, even under the best of circumstances from their perspective (including the post-September 11 Afghan campaign and American military operation in Iraq) could not win more than 11 percent of the vote, which says something. However, if this transition is delayed, and the prominent political leaders are forced to remain in exile, then there is a growing possibility that religious parties can garner more public support.

Second, without reforms in the educational sector and closing of the extremist *madrassas* (around 10 to 15 percent of the total number of *madrassas* in Pakistan), there is little hope for a brighter future. The curriculum of these *madrassas* is outdated, anti-social, and contrary to the true teachings of Islam.¹¹ It is more urgent to update such textbooks than to invest in the modernization of weapon systems. From a long-term perspective, funding for public-sector schools would have been a much better bargain for the United States than offering more F-16 fighter aircrafts to Pakistan.

Last but not least, the success of the ongoing peace process between India and Pakistan (fully supported by the United States) will also go a long way toward resolving the “insecurity” dilemma faced by Pakistan. To make it sustainable, support from the international community is a must. The recent India-Pakistan cooperation in dealing with the devastating earthquake in the region is indeed a good omen. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 Stephen P. Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 2004), 328.
- 2 Many academics also often refer to this theory in their discourse on Pakistan. For instance see, Anatol Lieven, “The Pressures on Pakistan”, *Foreign Affairs* 81(1) (January/February 2002).
- 3 For a complete transcript of the speech, see <www.pakistani.org/pakistan/legislation/constituent_address_11aug1947.html> (accessed November 2005).
- 4 “An Engaging Dictator Who Wants to Stay That Way,” *The Economist*, December 12, 1981, 48.
- 5 Zahid Hussain, “Inside Jihad,” *Newsline*, February 2001, 22.
- 6 For detailed statistics about sectarian violence in Pakistan, see <www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/database/sect-killing.htm> (accessed November 2005).
- 7 Dennis Kux, *The United States and Pakistan, 1947-2000: Disenchanted Allies* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Centre Press, 2001), 57.
- 8 Mushahid Hussain and Akmal Hussain, *Pakistan: Problems of Governance* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 1986), 30.
- 9 Amir Rana, *A to Z of Jihadi Organizations in Pakistan* (Lahore: Mashal Books, 2004). Also see Amir Rana, “245 religious parties in Pakistan,” *Daily Times*, April 13, 2003.
- 10 “A Report to the National Security Council by the Executive Secretary on the Position of the United States with respect to South Asia (declassified),” January 5, 1951, NSC 93, NND867400, available at Digital National Security Archive.
- 11 For details see, Tariq Rahman, “The *Madrassa* and the State of Pakistan: Religion, Poverty and the Potential for Violence in Pakistan,” *HIMAL*, <www.himalmag.com/2004/february/essay.htm> (accessed November 2005). Also see International Crisis Group, “Pakistan, Madrassahs, Extremism and the Military,” *Asia Report* 36.