

Swat slipping from Pakistan's hands

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Swat, a scenic mountainous district in North West Frontier Province (NWFP), just about 100 kms from Islamabad, is on the verge of slipping into the hands of the Taliban with disastrous consequences for Pakistan, as well as for the region. By media accounts, 80 percent of the district is with Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) leader Mullah Fazlullah, a tech-savvy Afghan veteran, who has been fighting not only the NATO forces in Afghanistan but also Pakistan Army and paramilitary forces for over a year now.

Though the security forces have been trying to push Fazlullah and his men out of Swat since November 2007, the Taliban group has firmly established its writ over the district and surrounding areas through relentless intimidation and violence. Fazlullah today virtually rules Swat, ordering officials and politicians to appear in his Shariah court and passing summary orders, more often of executions, against those who he and his men consider either American spies or enemies. The district capital, Mingora, witnesses executions almost every day with the corpses hanging from the town's grain market square labelled as the Khuni Chowk or bloody square by the frightened locals.

Fazlullah has also ordered closing of schools for girls in the district. On December 24, 2008 he issued an edict through his radio banning female education after January 15, 2009. According to an education ministry official, close to 173 schools, 105 of them for girls were destroyed by the militants. This deprived more than 40,000 students of education; the figure included 23,308 girls and 17,338 boys.

To enforce his edicts, Fazlullah has established over 70 courts and set up checkpoints to collect taxes. More than 73 Shariah Courts have been set up in Swat so far. In January, he summoned 43 Parliamentarians to his courts which sent a panic wave across the political spectrum with politicians raising the issue in the National Assembly.

In December 2008, he stepped up his campaign of intimidation by targeting the Awami National Party leadership and activists. His constant attacks on the ANP cadre made most legislators escape to safer areas. Half of the district police force too has deserted while the new recruits refused to serve. An embattled police force had to recruit cadets from other areas.



Fazlullah commands a force of 2000 to 4000 men armed with automatic rifles, machine guns, rocket launchers and mortars. Most of them sport long hair, beards, camouflage vests and running shoes. They have used tank mines and bombs of various types. Fazlullah has raised a team of suicide bombers to strike at security installations and convoys. In 2008, there were 11 suicide attacks in 2008.

State Response

Fazlullah's rise was facilitated in more ways than one by the absence of any coherent civil-military response to the impending crisis. The civilian government, a coalition of rival political parties — Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-N (PMLN), remained embroiled in a tug of war for power in the early part of 2008 and insisted on reviewing the earlier decision of their common enemy, President Pervez Musharraf, to launch a military offensive against Fazlullah in November 2007—Operation Rah-e-Haq I. The political parties, including ANP which came to power in NWFP, decided to open talks with the Taliban and tribal leaders for possible peace deals. The success of the November military operation —Fazlullah had to escape from Swat—was quickly dwindled away in political one-upmanship.

ANP, a Pashtun party, signed peace deals with pro-Taliban forces soon after coming to power in April-May 2008¹. A widely-respected Taliban ideologue, Maulana Sufi Muhammad, head of the outlawed Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM- The Movement for the Implementation of Mohammad's Sharia Law)¹ was released and Shariah was introduced in the Provincially Administrated Tribal Areas (PATA) of Swat and Malakand².

¹ The influence of TNSM reached its peak between 1994 and 96 when it succeeded in forcing the government to impose Shariah in the region. Its leader, Sufi Mohammad, a former Jamaat -e-Islami member, a veteran of the Afghan Jihad, has had extensive contacts with the Taliban since the latter's inception. In 2001, Sufi Mohammad along with 10,000 members fought the US-led coalition. Although Sufi Mohammad was imprisoned soon after his return, given the dangerously high anti-US sentiment in the region, the group retained considerable support among the people.

However, in June 2008, when the Government reversed its decision to amend the Shari Nizam-e-Adl Act, 1999 in accordance with the wishes of the TNSM/ Pakistan Taliban, Fazlullah violated the ceasefire and renewed his attacks on schools, ANP leaders and security forces. The Army remained hesitant to launch a counter-offensive till, in July 2008, Fazlullah's men abducted 38 Frontier Corps soldiers and killed three ISI personnel. The Army launched Operation Rah-e-Haq II³ in July 2008 and this time the offensive relied on air power and artillery without much success though. While Fazlullah and his men managed to keep away from the bombardment, people were forced to migrate in large numbers. As the Taliban elements in Bajaur (led by Mullah Faqir Ahmed, another Sufi Mohammad protégé) raised the pitch of violence, the Army shifted its focus away from Swat to concentrate on the area contiguous to Durand Line (Operation Sherdill). This gave Fazlullah's group a breather from the offensive and time to regroup.

As the Army and FC kept the Taliban at bay in Bajaur, the civilian governments in Islamabad and Peshawar tried to work out a peace deal with Fazlullah's men. The government even tried to rope in Fazlullah's father-in-law and TNSM founder Sufi Mohammad to facilitate the dialogue with the militants. But Fazlullah, sensing victory, refused to go along and raised the level of intimidation and violence in the district. The Army launched Operation Rah -e-Haq III in January 2009 to secure the main supply lines and consolidate the district capital Mingora. Four Army Brigades were pressed into operation along with FC troops—15,000 troops in all-- supported by air and artillery elements. The last week of January saw intensive aerial and artillery bombing of the region. The security forces have regained Mingora and are poised to push the Taliban out of the district.

The fresh military offensive has affected the population more severely. A third of Swat's 1.5 million population has fled to safer districts of NWFP and other big cities as far as Islamabad and Karachi. Over a thousand hotels have shut down, causing large scale unemployment and distress in the conflict-affected district. About 1200 locals have died in the ongoing conflict and the security forces have lost 189 men since 2007. Despite the losses, the Army has no other alternative but to push the Taliban towards Durand Line even at a heavy cost. The Taliban, on the other hand, can make the choice of retreating for the moment to return after the Army leaves for other battle fronts in the US-led War on Terror.

With inputs from Aashti Salman

¹ The ANP government in NWFP stuck deals with Sufi Mohammad on April 21 and with Mullah Fazlullah on May 21, 2008

² For details of the peace deal, visit

http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/05/pakistani_government.php ;

http://www.app.com.pk/en /index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=38939&Itemid=1

³ For a complete description of Rah-e-Haq I, visit

<http://orfonline.org/cms/sites/orfonline/modules/analysis/AnalysisDetail.html?cmaid=12704&mmacmaid=12705>