

# **Pakistan Security Research Unit (PSRU)**

## **Brief Number 54**



### **Public perceptions of Pakistan's war against the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan**

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**10<sup>th</sup> December 2009**

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# Public perceptions of Pakistan's war against the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan

Mustafa Qadri<sup>1</sup>

Public support in Pakistan for the war against the Taliban insurgency within its territory has reached unparalleled levels this year. In previous years, however, the war has been extremely unpopular with most of the population. The indiscriminate use of force by the Army, Air Force and Frontier Corp in all of its operations against the TTP has contributed to the death and dislocation of many civilians.<sup>2</sup> Along with exacerbating the already deep mistrust of the Pakistan state by the Pashtun tribal societies of the Federally and Provincially Administered Tribal Areas (henceforth 'the tribal areas'), the trauma visited upon civilians by these offensives has greatly contributed to the war's unpopularity across Pakistan. By May 2009, however, less than twelve months later, the Pakistan Army-led war against the Taliban in the country's north west and South Waziristan had received endorsement by a wide array of political parties, religious groups and media, including many of those who were previously critical of the entire enterprise. According to a Gallup Pakistan poll conducted in the last week of October 2009 51% of the public supported the military operations, only 13% opposed it while a large proportion, 36%, were unsure.<sup>3</sup> On May 18, 2009 an 'All Parties Committee' comprising all major political parties represented in federal parliament signed a resolution endorsing Operation Rah-e-Rast in the northwestern Malakand Division which includes the Swat valley. The resolution emphasised the need to protect the "writ of the state."<sup>4</sup> Public support for Operation Rah-e-Rast and the subsequent operation in South Waziristan was also evident, such as in the large banners supporting the Army that were unveiled in the

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<sup>2</sup> See, for eg, "Pakistan: Avoid Civilian Casualties" Human Rights Watch May 11, 2009. Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/05/11/pakistan-avoid-civilian-casualties>. Accessed December 1, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> "Military Action in Waziristan" Gilani Poll / Gallup Pakistan November 3, 2009. Available at: <http://www.gallup.com.pk/Polls/03-11-09.pdf>. Accessed November 23, 2009. But note that in another poll only 36% of respondents were hopeful military operations would bring peace, 37% believed it would worsen the situation and 27% were unsure. When asked whose war was being fought, 37% said it was Pakistan's own war, 39% believes was the United States' war, while 22% thought both Pakistan and America have a shared interest in the war. Nevertheless this shows a sharp increase in support for Army operations from previous years. In 2008, 71% of Pakistanis surveyed by the International Republican Institute favoured dialogue with the TTP over military operations. See "IRI Index Pakistan Public Opinion Survey June 1-15, 2008" International Republican Institute July 17, 2008. Available at: <http://www.iri.org/mena/pakistan/pdfs/2008%20July%2017%20Survey%20of%20Pakistan%20Public%20Opinion.%20June%201-15.%202008.pdf>. Accessed December 1, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Text of the resolution is available at <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/the-newspaper/front-page/apc-endorses-swat-operation-pmlns-clear-stand-silences-dissenters-959>. Accessed November 23, 2009.

garrison city of in Rawalpindi in October 2009<sup>5</sup> and the massive aid drive for civilians made homeless by the conflict in Malakand. In June 2009, a little over a month into the third major Army operations in the Swat valley, a council of religious scholars endorsed the use of force against the TTP.<sup>6</sup> Geo TV, the most popular news broadcaster in the country, routinely features patriotic montages of security forces engaging insurgents in the tribal areas accompanied by uplifting music. What has caused the transformation in public opinion in favour of the war against the Taliban? This paper will seek to provide an explanation. Prior to analysing the reasons behind the shift in public opinion, however, it is necessary to briefly review public perceptions of Pakistan's war against the Taliban over the past seven years.

### ***Public sentiments towards Pakistan war against TTP prior to May 2009***

Ever since they started in 2002, Pakistan's military operations against anti-state insurgents along the country's north west border with Afghanistan had always been unpopular in Pakistan. The October 2006 missile strike on a madrassa in the key insurgent tribal area of Bajaur that links northwest Pakistan with Afghanistan is a case in point. The attack resulted in the death of 80 people housed inside the madrassa, and the images of their dead bodies were broadcast on television stations across the country. Whether or not those killed were insurgent fighters, they were viewed as victims of an unnecessary war. Unsurprisingly, the attack was widely condemned from across the political spectrum,<sup>7</sup> on the streets of most of the country's major cities and large swathes of the popular media.<sup>8</sup> But condemnation was not limited merely to operations seen to have resulted in civilian casualties. A massive military operation centred on the South Waziristan city of Wana in March 2004, was forcefully rebuked by a cross section of opposition political parties, including former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League and others, like the Pakistan Peoples Party, that are now in government.<sup>9</sup> The Mutahidda Majlis-i-Amal, a coalition of the most powerful mainstream religious parties that contest parliamentary elections, condemned the Wana attacks as 'state terrorism', and similar sentiments were echoed in fiery sermons delivered in neighbourhood mosques in all of the country's major cities.<sup>10</sup> Similar condemnation followed subsequent operations in North and South Waziristan<sup>11</sup> as well as the commencement of the most recent operation in Malakand Division that includes the Swat valley.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Khattak, Inamullah "Banners supporting the army flood Pindi markets" October 22, 2009. Available at: <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/the-newspaper/national/banners-supporting-army-flood-pindi-markets-309> . Accessed November 23, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> "Ulema back Swat military operation" The News International June 9, 2009. Available at: [http://www.thenews.com.pk/daily\\_detail.asp?id=182113](http://www.thenews.com.pk/daily_detail.asp?id=182113) . Accessed on November 26, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> "NWFP Assembly condemns Bajaur Operation" Dawn newspaper October 31, 2006. Available at: <http://www.dawn.com/2006/10/31/welcome.htm>. Accessed on November 29, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> "Press questions over madrassa attack" BBC News November 1, 2006. Available at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/6105210.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/6105210.stm) . Accessed on November 29, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> "ANP chief condemns Wana operation" Dawn newspaper March 24, 2004. Available at: <http://www.dawn.com/2004/03/25/nat9.htm> . Accessed on November 23, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Khan, Anwarullah "Govt asked to stop operation in Wana" Dawn newspaper March 23, 2004. Available at: <http://www.dawn.com/2004/03/25/nat8.htm> . Accessed on November 23, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Hassan, Ahmed "MMA condemns Fata operations" March 12, 2006. Available at: <http://www.dawn.com/2006/03/12/top5.htm> . Accessed on November 23, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> "Eyebrows raised over Swat action in NA" Dawn newspaper. Available at <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/pakistan/12-eyebrows-raised-over-swat-action--bi-09> .. Accessed on November 23, 2009.

Up until Pakistan forces commenced their third major operation in Malakand Division in late April 2009, the public discourse surrounding Pakistan's war against the Taliban was dominated by the notion that Pakistan was waging a war not in its own interests but those of the United States. Owing to the high level of civilian casualties and the tribal areas' long history of resistance to overt control from external powers, it was argued by many influential public commentators like cricketer turned politician Imran Khan<sup>13</sup> and Jamiat-e-Islami leader Qazi Hussain Ahmed<sup>14</sup> that insurgent violence in the tribal areas was a response to state encroachment into these regions that commenced in late 2001 under former President Pervez Musharraf. The insurgency itself was understood to be a consequence of military operations that stoked nationalist, anti-imperialist sentiments among tribal Pashtuns.<sup>15</sup> The underlying narrative was that the TTP was not the driving force behind the insurgency. The driving force was a legitimate expression of Pashtun self-determination in the context of generations of neglect and disenfranchisement by the Pakistan state rather than an Islamist insurgency seeking a takeover of the state. "There is no real attempt by the Taliban to conquer [Pakistan]... these are Pakhtoons fighting for Islam in reaction to the US and [Pakistan] Army," said Jamiat-e-Islami Karachi Ameer Mohammad Hussain Mehanti during an interview with the author on January 14, 2009. Moreover, acts of terrorism attributed to the TTP were considered a response to state violence in the tribal areas rather than politically motivated violence calculated to terrorise civilians and intimidate the state. "Pakistan should not be fighting [in FATA]... they are killing ordinary people," Mehanti added during the interview, arguing that violence attributable to the TTP was committed in revenge for attacks by Pakistan and United States forces that, according to most studies,<sup>16</sup> kill far more civilians than belligerents. Jamiat-e-Islami, along with Jamiat-e-Ulema Islami, is one of only a handful of organisations to run humanitarian relief camps deep inside the conflict zones in the tribal areas. Their activists delivering humanitarian assistance in conflict areas were among the first to note the high civilian casualty rate from state military

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<sup>13</sup> Khan, Imran "How to clear up this mess?" Pakpoint April 24, 2009. Available at:

<http://www.pakpoint.com/how-to-clear-the-mess-imran-khan/3883/> . Accessed November 29, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> "Qazi Hussain Ahmad demands the government to immediately revoke expected military operation in tribal areas." Pakistan Press International September 7, 2003. Available at:

<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-107534136.html> . Accessed November 28, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> In 2006, following a deadly air raid by Pakistan forces that killed 80 people in Bajaur, insurgent commander Haji Mohammad Omar told the BBC there would be "war" if the Pakistan Army continued to "brutalise" the population. "Rally condemns Pakistan air raid" BBC News October 31, 2006.

Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/6101092.stm> . Accessed on December 1, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> With respect to bombings by US pilotless drones against suspected militants, security analyst Amir Mir estimated that 94% of casualties were actually civilians (Mir, Amir "60 drone hits kill 14 al-Qaeda men, 687 civilians" The News International April 10, 2009. Available at:

[http://www.thenews.com.pk/top\\_story\\_detail.asp?Id=21440](http://www.thenews.com.pk/top_story_detail.asp?Id=21440) . Accessed on November 24, 2009). In

contrast, Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann from the New America Foundation estimated that the civilian casualty figure was 31-32% ("Revenge of the Drones" New America Foundation website October 19, 2009. Available at:

[http://www.newamerica.net/publications/policy/revenge\\_of\\_the\\_drones](http://www.newamerica.net/publications/policy/revenge_of_the_drones) . Accessed on November 24,

2009.). Bill Roggio and Alexander Mayer from the Long War Journal website estimate that civilians casualties account for only 9.6% of drone strike fatalities ("Analysis: A look at US airstrikes in Pakistan through September 2009" October 1, 2009. Available at:

[http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/10/analysis\\_us\\_airstrik.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/10/analysis_us_airstrik.php) . Accessed on November 24,

2009.). All of these estimates must be considered in light of the fact that there is a high error margin with respect to data from the tribal areas owing to its remoteness, the concomitant difficulty in obtaining primary source information, and the US policy of, officially at least, neither denying nor confirming its drone strikes in the tribal areas.

operations against the TTP.<sup>17</sup> As one 22 year old former member of the Swat Scouts, a paramilitary force under the command of the Frontier Corp, explained to the author in September 2008, “we were ordered to fire mortars on unarmed civilians... I don't know how many [civilians] I might have killed. It is still happening now. [Pakistan forces] are killing men, women, children, everyone [in indiscriminate bombing].”<sup>18</sup>

### ***Shift in public sentiment towards Pakistan war against the TTP***

The critical shift towards support for military operations in the tribal areas has been caused by the public's perception that Pakistan is fighting a war for its existence. Hitherto security force incursions into the tribal areas were seen as wars pitting Pakistanis against one another at the behest of the United States. The Taliban insurgency within Pakistan was a response to the destruction caused by these wars, igniting a tradition of resistance to outside interference and old resentment towards the state because of its inability to provide socioeconomic opportunities to the communities of the tribal areas. That perception appears to be changing. Based on available data, there are three broad explanations for the shift. The first of these has been the public's increased acceptance that the TTP is seeking to overthrow the state as demonstrated by the almost daily bombings against ordinary Pakistanis throughout the country, and particularly in the north west and Islamabad. The TTP's leadership has openly admitted responsibility for most of the bombings which either directly or indirectly have claimed hundreds of civilian lives. As the violence continues to escalate, so too does the public's resolve to combat the TTP through force. A second factor has been the increased resolve of the Army and other security forces to launch decisive and coordinated attacks on TTP strongholds as compared with military operations in previous years. A final key factor has been the state's effective public relations campaign to paint security forces as brave guarantors of national security and the mobilisation of grassroots political activists and civil society to meet the humanitarian crisis created when millions were made homeless by the war in the Swat valley. With respect to Swat, as compared with previous displacements from Bajaur, Orakzai and Waziristan, civil and military authorities raced to provide humanitarian assistance, demonstrating not only that the state was serious about defeating the insurgents, but also that it alone was capable of providing for those caught in the conflict.

Along with these factors, however, there is one other important factor that, although difficult to quantify, goes towards explaining the shift in public perception of the war against the Taliban. This relates to the continued refusal to accept that militant, political Islam generally, and the Taliban movement in particular, is responsible for the insurgent violence that has rocked Pakistan. Perceived enemies of Pakistan, be they India, Israel or the United States, are directly or indirectly blamed both by state authorities and much of the population. According to Mufti Zubair Usmani from the Jamia Darul Uloom, Karachi, for example, the TTP “is an instrument of RAW [the Research and Analysis Wing of the Indian Prime Minister's Office]... Whoever is

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Mohammad Hussain Mehanti by author, January 14, 2009. See also Qadri, Mustafa “Civilians suffer as Pakistan army targets Taliban” Reuters AlertNet October 1, 2008. Available at: <http://www.alertnet.org/db/blogs/54127/2008/09/1-155515-1.htm> . Accessed November 24, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Qadri, Mustafa “Civilians suffer as Pakistan army targets Taliban” Reuters AlertNet October 1, 2008. Available at: <http://www.alertnet.org/db/blogs/54127/2008/09/1-155515-1.htm> . Accessed November 24, 2009.

doing things in Pakistan is doing it to defeat Pakistan [which] happens to be in a strategic location [and] an atomic power. Because of this, the violence will continue.”<sup>19</sup> Provincial and federal intelligence officials interviewed by the author off the record reach a remarkably similar conclusion, citing secret intelligence from the interrogation of captured TTP members and other sources that suggest Indian and Afghan government involvement. Federal Minister of Interior Rehman Malik has made much the same allegations, blaming India for the bulk of the violence.<sup>20</sup> Retired and serving civil and military bureaucrats informally approached by the author also blame India for the current violence, along with the United States and Israel.

There is no concrete evidence to substantiate allegations of foreign involvement in any of the bombings attributed to the TTP inside Pakistan and one must remain sceptical of them until such evidence is obtained. However, it is clear that the perception that foreigners are responsible for the gruesome acts of terrorism that have killed hundreds of civilians and many more security personnel has made the conflict more palatable for the public, and hence made it more viable for politicians, religious leaders and the Army to vocally endorse a morally ambiguous war that has without question devastated the civilian populations of the tribal areas. An added consequence of the tendency to blame foreign actors for TTP violence in Pakistan is that it diverts attention away from the TTP and its origins in the broader, violent history of militant, political Islam in Pakistan. On one level, the aversion to reflecting on militant, political Islam is theological. Mufti Usman notes that it is “impermissible” in Islam to kill innocent civilians, whether they are Muslim or not, the implication being that non-Muslims, and not the Taliban, must be responsible for the almost daily bombings that have gripped Pakistan.<sup>21</sup> It may simply be too traumatic for mainstream Pakistani society to accept that fellow Muslims are using the language of Islam to kill other Muslims. Another factor is the fact that many in Pakistan still view the original Afghan Taliban movement as a legitimate Islamic, military and political force. Often the TTP is viewed as a corruption of the original Taliban “not connected to even Mullah Omar and other [Afghan] Taliban. All of these people, we don’t know who they are and where all their money [and resources] come from,” explains Mufti Usmani. This may explain why the government, media and religious commentators rarely refer to the insurgents as Taliban.<sup>22</sup>

Avoiding the role of militant, political Islam may help rally the population behind the state’s war against the TTP, but it comes at a cost. It prevents Pakistani society from confronting the very real, and serious infiltration of militant, political Islam into

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with author, conducted in Karachi, January 15, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> “India sponsoring terrorism in Pakistan, alleges Rehman Malik” Sify News September 23, 2009. Available at: <http://sify.com/news/india-sponsoring-terrorism-in-pakistan-alleges-rehman-malik-news-international-jjxvOkbifji.html> . Accessed on November 25, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Note that the rate of suicide and other bombings by non-state actors within Pakistan dramatically increased following the siege of Islamabad’s Red Mosque on July 10, 2007. See Meyer, Bill “Suicide attacks soar in Pakistan since 2007” Cleveland.com September 28, 2009. Available at: [http://www.cleveland.com/world/index.ssf/2008/09/suicide\\_attacks\\_soar\\_in\\_pakist.html](http://www.cleveland.com/world/index.ssf/2008/09/suicide_attacks_soar_in_pakist.html) . Accessed November 24, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> One Sunni organisation, Sunni Tehreek, refers to the TTP as “those who claim to administer Sharia [Islamic law] and fight in the name of Islam.” See <http://www.sunnitehreek.com.pk/st/index.php> . Accessed December 1, 2009. Interestingly, Sunni Tehreek hails from the Barelvi school of Sunni Islamic thought that is generally hostile to the militant Deobandi school favoured by the TTP and most other Islamist militant groups in Pakistan.

mainstream society. In short, it effectively absolves the state and religious leaders from their culpability in creating the very environment that enabled the TTP to form and so rapidly expand throughout the tribal areas. Furthermore, the tendency to blame outside interference for Pakistan's present security problems continues the dangerous tradition of absolutist and uncritical animosity towards perceived foreign enemies like India, Israel, and the United States at the expense of critical reflections on the failures of the Pakistan state, its institutions, its political culture and the Army's interference in statecraft along with other relevant domestic factors. This is not to say that Pakistan is a hotbed of xenophobia but merely to note that the focus on perceived foreign threats reflects a failure to capitalise on the groundswell of popular consciousness and anger created by the recent violence. Along with challenging continued autocracy, corruption and economic insecurity, there is arguably at present strong public will to confront the violence that has befallen Pakistan, as demonstrated by the high regard for Pakistan's security forces and the successful conclusion of the 'Lawyers Movement' for the restoration of judges dismissed by former President Pervez Musharraf that ended in March 2009.

At the same time, the failure of the state to provide physical and socioeconomic security has created increased scepticism towards modern institutions of government. A recent Gallup Pakistan poll indicated that two thirds of all Pakistanis believe that Islam requires an Islamic state (69%), however in a follow up question just as many (68%) believe that democracy is consistent with an Islamic system of government; 23% believe that Islam does not require an Islamic state, and 8% were unsure. Another poll found that more than half of Pakistanis (57%) blame political parties for not creating a more stable political system in the country. These statistics have their limitations, but the contradictory views offered suggest a high degree of confusion and insecurity by the population in what is a very difficult period in Pakistan's history. Perhaps that is why a British Council survey released in November 2009 found that sixty percent of those interviewed viewed the Army as the most trusted institution in the country.<sup>23</sup> The second, with 50 percent support, was religious educational institutions. The national government came last at 10 percent. This may offer a further explanation for the high degree of support for military operations in the tribal areas despite an aversion towards attributing blame for the current non-state violence on the TTP in particular, or militant, political Islam more generally.

### ***Conclusion***

Since its creation in 1947, political life in Pakistan has been dominated by highly concentrated centres of power, resulting in high levels of institutional corruption and unaccountability.<sup>24</sup> The TTP and other Islamist groups are well aware that there is little confidence in formal, parliamentary democracy. "The elite don't want the Taliban [to gain power in Pakistan] because then they will not be able to continue stealing the society's wealth," a TTP activist from the Kohat area south of Peshawar, an area where the state security forces have a military presence but whose residents nevertheless harbour strong support for the insurgents, told the author during an

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<sup>23</sup> "Pakistan: the next generation" British Council November 2009. Available at:

<http://www.britishcouncil.pk/pakistan-Next-Generation-Report.pdf> . Accessed on November 30, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> In this year's Transparency International 'Corruption Perception Index', Pakistan ranked 139<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries surveyed. See "Corruption Perception Index 2009" Transparency International. Available at: [http://www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi/2009/cpi\\_2009\\_table](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2009/cpi_2009_table) . Accessed November 27, 2009.

interview in February 2009. “The solution to Pakistan’s problems is to follow Islam,” the TTP activist added. Interestingly, the British Council survey noted earlier also found that a third of young people favoured “Islamic law” over democracy. Around as many thought democracy was the best system for Pakistan.<sup>25</sup> Mullah Noor Alam, a mid-ranking Taliban commander involved in intelligence gathering for Maulana Fazlullah in Malakand, interviewed by the author in the Swat valley in September 2008 said, “democracy in Pakistan... has brought so much corruption so [democracy] is not a role model.” When asked if democracy and sharia law are nevertheless compatible he added that, “democracy and *shariat* could not stand side by side. Democracy is made by the Jews and the Christians so it suits their countries. Our country was created under the banner of Islamic ideology so *shariat* is our way.”<sup>26</sup> There are many in the mainstream of Pakistani society who would share these views. This does not necessarily mean that they would welcome Taliban-style rule in the country. But it does suggest that, underlying the recent groundswell of support for military operations against the TTP, the greater task for Pakistan authorities is to improve public confidence in institutions of the state and their capacity to deliver physical and socioeconomic security to the population.

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<sup>25</sup> See footnote 20 above.

<sup>26</sup> For an edited version of the interview see Qadri, Mustafa “Al Qaeda, our kin” Canberra Times January 17, 2009. Available at: <http://mustafaqadri.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/al-qaeda-our-kin-canberra-times-17-january-2009-mustafa-qadri.jpg> . Accessed November 30, 2009.