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Pakistan's divides grow ever-deeper

By Syed Saleem Shahzad
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The brazen attack on Monday on the United States consulate in Peshawar, the capital of Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), was the first ever against a US facility in the restive region.

The attack, in which gunmen fired on a security post at the consulate in broad daylight before detonating a car bomb, killing eight people, comes at a key time in Pakistan's turbulent history: deep fissures have created an environment ripe for exploitation by militants.

At stake is not only the security - and survival - of Pakistan, but the broader United States-led struggle in Afghanistan against the resilient Taliban.

In this volatile situation, political polarization has reached a climax in insurgency-hit NWFP between the majority Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns. The Punjab-dominated establishment comprising the judiciary, the chief of army staff, the prime minister and the media corps has ganged up against Sindhi President Asif Ali Zardari, making him a virtual figurehead. Al-Qaeda-led militants, far from being crushed as the military claims, have regrouped and are stronger than ever.

The timing and target of the Peshawar attack could not have been more significant as it followed close on an announcement by army chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kiani that the months-long operation in the South Waziristan tribal area, the headquarters of the al-Qaeda linked Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP - Pakistan Taliban) had been concluded and that thousands of displaced

families could return home. Earlier, Kiani had announced victories in Bajaur, Mohmand and Khyber agencies against militants.

Monday's assault on the consulate - the first on a US mission in Pakistan since 2006 - was clearly a statement that any declarations about the demise of militancy are grossly premature. The TTP claimed responsibility, but the plan in all likelihood would have been hatched by al-Qaeda.

Although the US Embassy in Islamabad says that the four attackers in two vehicles who tried to breach the heavily fortified compound caused only minor damage, a Pakistani security official told Asia Times Online on the condition of anonymity that the militants did enter the compound and exchanges of gun fire were heard, followed by a huge explosion.

It is possible that the extent of the damage is being played down. It is an open secret that the consulate serves as a front for Central Intelligence Agency operations against al-Qaeda and it is also believed to be the headquarters of American defense contractors who, according to American media, have been tasked to kill militants and pro-Taliban and al-Qaeda figures in Pakistan.

Shifting sands

In the past year, Pakistan has applied utmost strength against militants in the tribal areas that border Afghanistan and all operations have been fully coordinated and supervised by the Americans.

The militants have survived without major losses for the simple reason that they have refused to directly engage the security forces, preferring to disperse to remote areas to return another day once the heat had died down and once refugees have returned home to provide them cover.

The political situation has played into the hands of the militants. From the grand US-inspired vision of a strong democratically elected civilian government that could place a firm hand on the tiller to steer Pakistan resolutely down the US's chosen route in the "war on terror", Zardari's administration has been critically weakened.

The fault lines began to emerge during General Pervez Musharraf's presidency in 2007 when he signed the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) that granted amnesty to hundreds of politicians, political workers and bureaucrats who were accused of corruption, embezzlement, money laundering, murder and terrorism.

The NRO was brokered by Britain and the US and was fully backed by the military and Kiani, who was at the time the chief spymaster of Musharraf's military-led establishment. The main beneficiaries of the NRO were former premier Benazir Bhutto and her spouse, Zardari. They were allowed to return to the country from exile and a string of charges against them was dropped.

However, there was mistrust among all partners. Despite an understanding that Bhutto would not return before elections scheduled for January 2008 (which were later deferred a month due to

Bhutto's assassination in December 2007), Bhutto came back on September 17, 2007. Saudi Arabia then pressurized Musharraf to also allow the return of another former premier, Nawaz Sharif.

In the general elections of February 18, 2008, Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League led by Sharif emerged the biggest winners. The situation was so delicate that the military chose to remain neutral.

Militants immediately exploited the situation by unleashing an unprecedented number of attacks across the country.

Musharraf tried to work with Zardari, who had taken over as co-chairman of the PPP after his wife's killing, to form a joint political front against the militants, but by then Musharraf had lost his grip at the helm of affairs - he stepped down in August 2008.

Kiani, by now chief of army staff, refused to take orders from Musharraf, and after Musharraf's foiled bids to dislodge him from his position Kiani developed ties with Zardari. In a tacit understanding between Washington, the Pakistan military and Zardari, Musharraf was given an honorable exit after nine years in power.

What the military did not anticipate was that Zardari would pitch himself as president. All intelligence reports had indicated that he would choose to be elected as a member of parliament in a by-election and then run the government as a de facto prime minister. Despite deep resentment against Zardari over his tainted past, the military could not stop him from being elected president in September 2008.

That was the beginning of a tug-of-war between the civilian government and the military establishment. The PPP-led government tried many times to bring the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) under the authority of the civilian government.

In addition, the military resented that several of Zardari's close friends who had very bad business reputations became a part of the government. Zardari ignored promptings from the ISI to distance himself from these associates. Zardari also stepped quickly and deeply into the US camp, to such a degree that China tacitly urged Pakistan to clarify the state of China-Pakistan relations.

At this point, the military began to set its sights on Zardari's government. The top brass reached out to the judiciary, the prime minister, leader of the opposition, Sharif, and the media corps as they all have strong roots in Pakistan's largest province, Punjab.

Zardari tried to appease Kiani by dishing out business opportunities to members of his family, but Kiani was not impressed and continued to weave his Punjabi nexus, which took a thread from Richard Holbrooke, the US envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan who is rumored not to be a big supporter of Zardari.

The military establishment took its concerns over Zardari to the US joint chiefs of staff chairman Admiral Mike Mullen and finally even to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. They hammered home the point that the real player was the military, not Zardari. Last month's high-level meetings in Washington between officials from Pakistan (including Kiani but not Zardari) and the US were an endorsement that Pakistan's political setup is now irrelevant in the "war on terror" and that all dealings are being made through the military.

Soon after Kiani returned from the US, the judiciary moved into action. The additional director general of the Federal Investigation Bureau, considered one of the most trusted people in the PPP government, was arrested on corruption charges. Corruption cases against the president are expected to be reopened as the Supreme Court last December declared the NRO unconstitutional. Parliament is also debating a bill of constitutional amendments that could result in the president being stripped of sweeping powers, including a transfer of powers from the Office of the President to the prime minister, taking away, including other things, the president's power to dismiss an elected government and appoint military chiefs. An all-party parliamentary committee has already agreed on the amendments.

One of the amendments - which was approved on Thursday - changes the name of NWFP to Khyber Pakhtoonkhwa - meaning "Khyber side of the land of the Pakhtuns". This has been a long-standing demand of the Pashtuns who dominate the region but it has to date been resisted by the Pakistani establishment as being a part of a conspiracy to break up the country. Non-Pashtuns in the province immediately rioted and called for a general strike. There were reports of violence.

As much as anything, the name change reflects the deep divisions in Pakistan, from the Pashtuns to the Punjabis, to the politicians to the generals - divisions and government indecision that militants will indubitably exploit to the full.