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Is Pakistan falling apart?

It has suffered disaster after disaster. Its people have lived through crisis upon crisis. Its leaders are unwilling or unable to act. But is it really the failed state that many believe?

By Patrick Cockburn

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Is Pakistan disintegrating? Are the state and society coming apart under the impact of successive political and natural disasters? The country swirls with rumours about the fall of the civilian government or even a military coup. The great Indus flood has disappeared

from the headlines at home and abroad, though millions of farmers are squatting in the ruins of their villages. The US is launching its heaviest-ever drone attacks on targets in the west of the country, and Pakistan closed the main US and Nato supply route through the Khyber Pass after US helicopters crossed the border and killed Pakistani soldiers.

Pakistan is undoubtedly in a bad way, but it is also a country with more than 170 million people, a population greater than Russia's, and is capable of absorbing a lot of punishment. It is a place of lop-sided development. It possesses nuclear weapons but children were suffering from malnutrition even before the floods. Electricity supply is intermittent so industrialists owning textile mills in Punjab complain that they have to use their own generators to stay in business. Highways linking cities are impressive, but the driver who turns off the road may soon find himself bumping along a farmer's track. The 617,000-strong army is one of the strongest in the world, but the government has failed to eliminate polio or malaria. Everybody agrees that higher education must be improved if Pakistan is to compete in the modern world, but the universities have been on strike because their budgets had been cut and they could not pay their staff.

The problem for Pakistan is not that the country is going to implode or sink into anarchy, but that successive crises do not produce revolutionary or radical change. A dysfunctional and corrupt state, part-controlled by the army, staggers on and continues to misgovern the country. The merry-go-round of open or veiled military rule alternates with feeble civilian governments. But power stays in the hands of an English-speaking élite that inherited from the British rulers of the Raj a sense of superiority over the rest of the population.

The present government might just squeak through the post-flood crisis because of its weakness rather than its strength. The military has no reason to replace it formally since the generals already control security policy at home and abroad, as well as foreign policy and anything else they deem important to their interests. The ambition of the Prime Minister, Yousuf Raza Gilani, in the next few weeks is to try to fight off the demand by the Chief Justice, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, that the legal immunity of President Asif Ali Zardari should be lifted. Mr Zardari, who owes his position to having been the husband of Benazir Bhutto, assassinated in 2007, has a well-established (though unproven) reputation for corruption during his pre-presidential days. Whatever the outcome of the struggle with the Supreme Court, Mr Zardari is scarcely in a position to stand up to the military leaders who may find it convenient to have such a discredited civilian leader nominally in power.

The military have ruled Pakistan for more than half the time since independence in 1947, but their control has never been quite absolute. The soldiers have never managed to put the [politicians](#) and the political parties permanently out of business, so the balance between military and non-military still counts. But there is no doubt about which way the struggle is going. A decisive moment came on 24 July this year when General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, the army chief of staff, was reappointed for another three-year term. The US embassy in Islamabad is said by foreign diplomats and Pakistani officials to have protested vigorously but unavailingly to Washington. It said that keeping General Kayani

in place would inflict a fatal wound on democracy and demonstrate that the civilian government could not get rid of its own army commander. In the event, Washington, always a crucial influence in Islamabad, decided that it would prefer to deal with a single powerful figure able to deliver in negotiations over Afghanistan. This was in keeping with US policy towards Pakistan since the 1950s. "We were put under intense pressure to keep Kayani," said an aide of President Zardari's. "We were left with no choice."

In one sense, the army never really left power after the fall of General Pervez Musharraf in 2008. It has continued to allocate to itself an extraordinarily high proportion of Pakistan's limited resources. Military bases all over the country look spruce and well cared-for, while just outside their razor-wire defences are broken roads and slum housing. At the entrance of a base just west of Islamabad last week was an elderly but effective-looking tank as a monument, the ground around it parade-ground clean. A few hundred yards away, a yellow bulldozer was driving through thick mud to make a flood-damaged road passable two months after the deluge, while a side street nearby was closed by a pool of stagnant grey-coloured water. At the other end of the country in northern Sindh, a local leader, who like many critics of the Pakistani military did not want his name published, pointed to a wide canal. He said: "This canal is not meant to be taking water from the Indus, but it is allowed to operate because it irrigates land owned by army officers."

The army projects a messianic image of itself in which it selflessly takes power to save the nation. It likes to contrast its soldierly virtues of incorruptibility and efficiency with the crookedness and ineptitude of civilians. "The army is very good at claiming to be the solution to problems which it has itself created," complained a local politician in Punjab. "It is also good at ascribing all failures to civilian governments, which cannot act because the army monopolises resources." He added caustically that in his area, the floods had arrived on 6 August and the first army assistance on 26 August.

Politicians and journalists criticising the army often employ code words where more is implied than stated. But last month, a government minister made a pungent attack on the army that astonished listening journalists. The minister for defence production, Abdul Qayyum Jatoi, directly accused the army of being behind the killing of the opposition leader, Benazir Bhutto, in 2007, and the revered Baluchi leader Nawab Bugti, a year earlier.

"We did not provide the army with uniforms and boots to kill their own countrymen," Mr Jatoi said bluntly, suggesting that the army leaders do their duty by going to defend Pakistan's frontiers and end rumours of a coup. He added: "Not only politicians should be blamed for corruption, rather [army] generals and judges should be held responsible."

Mr Jatoi's words reflect what Pakistanis say about the army in private, but seldom dare do so in public. He paid a price for his forthrightness, since Mr Gilani promptly sacked him and he is being accused of high treason in a petition before the courts. He says he does not miss his job very much because all the important decisions in his ministry were in any case taken by the military. Pakistanis are unhappy because every week seems to bring

another piece of bad news. The country is highly politicised with millions of people observing with acute interest the struggles for power at the central and local level. Taxi drivers discuss the make-up of the Supreme Court and its future composition. When it comes to open and lively political disputes, Pakistan is more like Lebanon, with its tradition of weak government but free expression of opinion, than Russia or Egypt with their supine and intimidated populations. Political parties in Pakistan are powerful and, given an ineffectual and corrupt administrative apparatus, everybody believes he or she needs somebody of influence to protect their interests. The army likes to denigrate civilian politicians as "feudalists", but in practice, big landowners have limited political power. Politicians gain influence through helping "clients" who need their support and that of their parties. "All politics here is really about jobs," says National Assembly member Mir Dost Muhammad Mazari.

Pakistan may not be falling apart, but the floods and the economic crisis – the government is bankrupt and inflation is at 18-20 per cent – means that every Pakistani I meet, be they small farmers, generals, industrialists or tribal leaders, is gloomy about the future. Each negative incident is interpreted as a sign of Pakistan's decline and a menacing omen of worse to come. Two recent scandals, both filmed as they happened and shown on as many as 26 cable television news channels, appear to confirm that the country is saturated with corruption and violence. This explosion of news channels has happened only in the past few years and makes it far more difficult to censor information.

One scandal was the notorious allegation of match-fixing in return for bribes made against Pakistani cricketers touring England. Commentators noted acidly that it was typical of the political system that the highly unpopular head of the Pakistan Cricket Board, Ijaz Butt, could not be dismissed by the defence minister, Ahmad Mukhtar, because he is the latter's brother-in-law. The scandal was peculiarly damaging because it broke in August just as the government was trying to persuade the world to give it large sums of money for flood relief.

A second scandal, which may have horrified Pakistanis even more than the bribery case in England, took place a few days earlier. News out of Pakistan at the time was all about the devastating floods and it received little international attention, but the gory events were again played endlessly on television. They took place on 15 August in the city of Sialkot, north of Lahore, where two wholly innocent teenagers called Hafiz Sajjad, 18, and Mohammed Muneeb Sajjad, 15, were misidentified as robbers and lynched by a crowd in the middle of a city street. Uniformed police stood nonchalantly by as men with iron rods and sticks took turns over a period of hours to beat the boys to death. Their mangled bodies were finally hung upside down in the market and the case only became known because a courageous television reporter had accidentally witnessed and secretly filmed what happened.

The Sialkot lynching shows Pakistani society at its worst. It also illustrates what happens when there is a breakdown in the administration of justice. In this case, the local police are reported to have routinely killed alleged criminals or handed them over to lynch mobs. This breakdown in the administration of justice is general. I asked Pashtun tribal

elders in a town near Lakki Marwat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province what they most needed. They all said governance: some form of effective local government administration. In south Punjab I went to a tribal court where 100 tough-looking Baluchi tribesmen had submitted a land dispute to a respected leader of their tribe. It was a complicated case involving a grandfather's will written in 1985 that left 12 acres of land unequally to the sons of his two marriages. The will was not very precise but nobody cared at first because the land was in the desert. But then one member of the family started to irrigate it and made it productive, leading to a rancorous dispute about ownership. The claimants to the land had chosen binding arbitration by a respected local leader, because a decision would be swift and free. They said that if they went through the state courts, the case could take years and the judges and police could be bribed.

But incidents such as the Sialkot lynching do not mean that the country is slipping into primal anarchy like Somalia. The Western world looks at Pakistan primarily in relation to Afghanistan, the Taliban, extreme jihadi Islam and the "war on terror". In a country of 170 million people there are always episodes that can be used as evidence to illustrate any trend, such as the belief that Pakistan is filled with bloodthirsty Islamic militants bent on holy war. Earlier this year, Foreign Policy magazine in Washington, which compiles an annual list of failed states, placed Pakistan 10th on the list, claiming that it showed more signs of state failure than Haiti and Yemen, and is only slightly more stable than Somalia and Yemen.

The country's high ranking in the survey tells one more about the paranoid state of mind of Washington post-9/11 than what is actually happening. There is no incentive to play down the "Islamic threat to Pakistan" on the part of any journalist who wants his or her story to be published, think-tankers who need a grant, or diplomats who seek promotion. The influence and prospects for growth of small jihadi organisations are systematically exaggerated. Over-attentive reading of the Koran is seen as the first step on the road to Islamic terrorism. Overstated claims about their activities by fundamentalist Islamic groups are happily lapped up and repeated.

Stories acquire a life of their own, regardless of their factual basis. During the recent floods, the foreign media reported on how militant Islamic groups were prominent and energetic in distributing aid to victims, the suggestion being that they will use their enhanced status to recruit more young men for holy war. This is supposedly what they did during the Kashmir earthquake of 2005, which killed 75,000 people whom it was difficult to reach because they lived high in the mountains. Christine Fair, an expert on Pakistan at Georgetown University in Washington, eloquently demolishes this and other spurious stories about the growth of militant Islam in Pakistan. She cites a survey of 28,000 households in 126 villages in Kashmir in which one-quarter of the inhabitants said they had received aid from international agencies, 7 per cent from non-militant Islamic charities, and just 1 per cent from the Islamic militant groups. Of course, the militantly religious of all kinds are likely to be to the front in helping survivors of any disaster, because most faiths adjure their adherents to help others in a crisis. The only person I met during a visit to flooded areas who could in any way be described as a religious militant

engaged in relief work was an amiable German Pentecostalist waiting for a flight in Lahore airport.

Another hardy-perennial story about Pakistan claims that because of the undoubted inadequacy of the Pakistani public education system, madrasahs, or religious schools, provide free education to the needy. Once enrolled, the children are supposedly brainwashed to turn them into the future foot soldiers of jihadi Islam. In reality, Pakistani educational specialists say that just 1.3 per cent of children in school go the madrasahs, 65 per cent to public schools, and 34 per cent to non-religious private schools. In recent years, it is the small and affordable private schools that have expanded fastest, mainly because jobs in them are open to educated women prepared to accept low pay. Most jihadis turn out to have been educated at public schools.

Extreme Islamists have seldom done well in elections in Pakistan. Widespread popular support for the Afghan Taliban stems primarily from the conviction that they are essentially a Pashtun national liberation movement fighting a foreign occupation. The Pakistani Taliban was once said to be "60 miles from Islamabad", but such scaremongering ignored the fact that there were three mountain ranges and one of the world's most powerful armies in between the Taliban's rag-tag fighters and the capital. The Pakistani state may not function very well but it is not failing, and – a pity – current crises may not even change it very much.