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Asian Affairs

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713686128>

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To cite this Article Lieven, Anatol(2008) 'PAKISTAN'S SURPRISING STABILITY', Asian Affairs, 39: 1, 57 — 68

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/03068370701792004

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03068370701792004>

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PAKISTAN'S SURPRISING STABILITY

ANATOL LIEVEN

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This is an updated version of the lecture which he gave to the society on 30 October 2007.

It is worth remembering the legacy of the Raj when we look at Pakistan. In the 1930s, one of my maternal uncles, as a Gurkha officer, spent some time with his regiment in Waziristan dealing with a religiously-inspired Pashtun rebellion led by the Fakir of Ipi – and we never did catch him, or, in 100 years on the Afghan frontier, “solve” the problem of Pashtun unrest, often led by religious figures and conducted in the name of “jihad”. We only contained and managed the problem.

There is a certain tendency, not only in the United States, but even among some less informed Brits, to feel that the issues we are facing in that part of the world are completely new and therefore have to be dealt with by completely new methods; and also that we have to aim at “solving” them, rather than managing them. In fact, when it comes to patterns of insurgency and Islamism among the Pashtuns, or Pathans as we used to call them, some of the patterns are very old indeed and there is a good deal that we can learn from our ancestors.

It is also worth pointing out that Pakistan, as a country, is Britain's most vital interest in the Muslim world. Other issues in the Muslim world may be important and serious – like the war in Afghanistan – but Pakistan is vital to Britain, for the simple reason that we are Pakistan to a considerable extent, or at least Leicester is, Bradford is, Leeds is, and so are extensive parts of London. The terrorist threat to Britain is principally a problem of Pakistanis in Britain and their links to extremist groups in Pakistan.

Britain, as a country, would therefore be making a fool's bargain if it contributed to throwing away the stability and future of Pakistan for any other cause or interest in the Muslim world. It is an issue of pure national interest, almost an existential interest when it comes to the safety of British citizens.

Events in Pakistan, particularly at the moment, are often so volatile that they eliminate from the picture consideration of deeper issues in the country and attempts at a deeper understanding. So this article is divided into three parts. In the first, I review current events in Pakistan; in the second, I look at the

underlying structures of society and power in Pakistan; and in the third I consider how far these are threatened by Islamist extremism and revolution.

Current events

My point of departure is that what Pakistan is facing today is a threat of terrorism and local unrest, not a threat of revolution and the overthrow of the state, or loss of the state's control of its nuclear deterrent. We are nowhere near the situation in Algeria in the early 1990s, let alone Iran in the late 1970s. This terrorism and unrest is extremely damaging, above all to the Pakistani economy and the prospects of future economic and social progress, but it is not, at present, and in my view for a very long time to come, an existential threat to the state.

Terrorism, as we have seen from the murder of Benazir Bhutto in Rawalpindi and the previous attack on her in Karachi, can now take place anywhere in the country, but when it comes to actual armed unrest and the taking over of particular territory, this is overwhelmingly a Pashtun issue, in the Pashtun areas. Even the extremist movement at the Red Mosque in Islamabad (which I visited in May before it was stormed) was chiefly staffed by Pashtuns. That is to do with the old patterns of Pashtun Islamist mobilisation, but it is also very much to do with the situation in Afghanistan, and the mobilisation of Pashtun ethnic sentiment within Pakistan in support of the militant Pashtuns in Afghanistan and their support for the Taliban.

The greatest single danger in Pakistan today, and the only danger which begins to impinge on the real integrity of the state and the existing system, is the fact that, unfortunately, the Pashtuns make up a disproportionate percentage of the Pakistani army – around 20 per cent, though they are only about 12 per cent of the population. The Pakistani army is a Punjabi/Pashtun army, with Punjabis in the large majority, Pashtuns second, Mohajirs, like General Musharraf himself, restricted to the officer corps and Baluch and Sindhis almost nowhere to be seen.

I should perhaps add that traditionally the Shias have been reasonably represented in the officer corps, because they are over-represented in the Punjabi aristocracy. But the Shias are very poorly represented in the rank and file of the army for the simple reason that the Pakistani military is recruited from the same areas that the British military was recruited from, where there are very few Shias. So there is not a concern over Sunni/Shia tension in the army.

Interestingly, the Punjabis are northern Punjabis, from a relatively limited number of districts, some of which, though Punjabi-speaking, are heavily coloured by Pashtun ethnic traditions. So the Pashtun areas are where the deepest concern lies. This is where we have seen the most dangerous incidents over the last few years, and including recent months when we have seen Pashtun units of the army, sent in to fight against the Taliban and its local allies in the tribal areas, refusing to fight and surrendering. As part of the unrest following the storming of the Red Mosque, we saw a major surrender with 120 or so men and several middle-ranking officers. There have also been desertions and, while

there have been few court-martials, there have been several processes leading to dismissal from the army.

This makes the current unrest different and more dangerous than the previous very frequent instances of regional unrest in the history of West Pakistan. I'm not going to discuss the history of united Pakistan before 1971 because that was a quite different and completely unviable country. I don't believe that West Pakistan is necessarily unviable. It is worth pointing out that the Pakistani Army has shown again and again that it can crack down successfully on armed secession, unrest, call it what you will, in Sind, in Karachi, in Baluchistan.

The moment when things begin to look tricky, and the moment when the generals get really worried, is when unrest spreads to the areas from which the soldiers are recruited. Then there begins the nightmare scenario: that the soldiers will copy what happened in Petrograd in 1917 – ground arms and refuse to fight. That is when you would begin to see the High Command of the army looking at a change of regime; whether the regime of the time is civilian or military.

However, one should not, at present, exaggerate this threat. The Pakistani Army is still prepared to fight, and will fight, against Islamist unrest and attempts to take territory, when this occurs outside the tribal areas. This is confirmed by recent events in Swat, where we, the British, once again had very considerable and repeated difficulties. Swat is not exactly in the tribal areas, but it is not exactly settled either. Ever since we created the system of indirect rule of the tribal areas, they have been governed, or rather not governed but managed, at a certain distance.

Now when it comes, not just to the willingness of the army to fight, but to attitudes in Pakistani society as a whole, it is very important to recognise and understand the following complex but critical distinction in the minds of Pakistanis. This is between on the one hand taking action against behaviour by the Islamists and radicals which threatens the Pakistani state and the stability of Pakistani society and on the other hand taking action in support of the United States, whether in the War on Terror more generally, or most particularly in Afghanistan.

The difference can be illustrated by figures. Support for the Islamists and the actual Islamist political agenda within Pakistan is very low in most of Pakistan. At the last elections, when, particularly in the Pashtun areas, public sentiment was tremendously coloured by reaction to the American invasion of Afghanistan, and when there may well have been an element of manipulation by the military government in support of the Islamists, they still only got barely 12 percent of the vote. The general assumption is that this time round that will go down to 9 percent or so. They will still be very important in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan, whose northern belt is a heavily Pashtun area. But what those figures indicate is that we are nowhere near the situation which we saw in Algeria in the early 1990s, let alone Iran in the late 1970s. There is not mass support across Pakistani society for an Islamist revolution.

Similarly, according to opinion polls a majority of Pakistanis, especially outside the Pashtun areas, supported, albeit unwillingly and with regret, the decision in the end to crack down on the Red Mosque militants. They deplore

acts of terrorism within Pakistan, like that against Benazir Bhutto, but also the repeated attempts to assassinate Musharraf and other senior officials.

On the other hand, according to every public opinion poll, there is absolutely overwhelming hostility to America's War on Terror and to the Western campaign in Afghanistan. The only partial exception is the 15 percent Shia minority. At the moment the Shias in Pakistan have enormous problems with the Sunni radicals, who have mounted a number of savage attacks on them in recent years. But if the United States attacks Iran, and thereby alienates the Pakistani Shias as well, hostility to the United States will approach 100 percent. The only exceptions would be a tiny proportion of Christians, Hindus and westernised Pakistanis.

This truth was also illustrated for me during my visit to Pakistan in May 2007, when I went round asking a particular question. In Washington over the past year, in discussions in which either explicit or veiled representatives of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) talked to American audiences, I heard again and again the following argument: America must press for a return to democracy in Pakistan, by which they meant rule by the PPP, so that the Pakistani government will have the democratic legitimacy and the mass support to really crack down on the Taliban in the tribal areas, and on the Islamist activities more generally.

But when I got to Pakistan and started talking to PPP activists (especially, but not exclusively, in the Pashtun areas), I heard a rather different story from many of them: "We need a government of Pakistan with democratic legitimacy and mass support so that it will be strong enough to tell the Americans to go to hell, when they come and ask for help."

So it was clear that the Americans who believe the PPP line in Washington have not exactly done their homework on the ground! Now of course my visit was in May and the murder of Benazir Bhutto and the death of almost 200 PPP supporters in two attacks since then may well have changed the views of PPP workers. But this is because the Islamists are attacking the PPP and trying to kill Benazir, not because the PPP has some wider ideological commitment to fighting on behalf of, or in alliance with, the United States. This is obviously a complicated issue on the ground because the Islamists, or at least the Taliban and its allies, have a dual agenda of attacking both the West and the present Pakistani authorities. But it is worth bearing in mind when it comes to trying to understand on what issues and how far it is possible for the West to get the Pakistani government – any Pakistani government, whether civilian or military – to do what we want in the "War on Terror".

As to the impact of Benazir Bhutto's assassination: she had many virtues, including great physical courage and immense determination; but she was no more a modern democrat with a coherent reformist agenda than her equivalents in the Philippines or Bangladesh.

She was a populist aristocrat, with all that means in terms of grace under pressure, presence of style and absence of substance; and her party, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) has long been a dynastic party, not a modern mass party with a common and credible program. For that reason it is unlikely to survive

the death of the last adult and politically credible representative of the Bhutto dynasty.

In the long run, the decay of the PPP will benefit both the Pakistani army and the Islamists: The army, because it will be able to bring bits of the PPP into government through offers of jobs and patronage – something that Musharraf has already done quite successfully in recent years. This will greatly help the military to put together coalition governments which the army will control from behind the scenes.

The Islamists will stand to benefit because if the PPP decays or disappears altogether, only the Islamists will remain as a political force promising reform of Pakistan's deeply corrupt, unjust and incompetent governing system. The PPP's promise to do this may have become more and more obviously hollow over the years, especially during Ms Bhutto's two corrupt and unsuccessful terms as prime minister – and this was reflected in the PPP's decline in the public opinion polls.

All the same, the poor of Pakistan had not completely forgotten her father's vow to bring them "clothing, food and shelter". No other politician in Pakistan can possibly offer this with a straight face – least of all Nawaz Sharif, with his roots and support among the industrialists of Punjab. So anyone who really wants radical change (as opposed to incremental change stemming from economic growth) will now have nowhere to go but the Islamists.

But that is for the future. In the next few months the twin questions are of how bad violence and unrest will become in Pakistan, and whether any kind of transition to elected civilian government can take place while Musharraf remains President. Neither answer will be clear for some time. Things have not begun well with the irresponsible talk of many politicians about the army having been responsible for Ms Bhutto's assassination – something for which there is no evidence whatsoever, while all the *prima facie* evidence points to an Islamist suicide attack – of the kind which a few days before Bhutto's murder targeted Musharraf's Interior Minister, Aftab Khan Sherpao.

On the other hand, at least so far none of the PPP leaders have called for mass attacks on the military and the state. Such attacks by PPP supporters that have taken place seem to have done so spontaneously. It may not be too cynical to suggest – and cynicism in analyzing Pakistani politics is rarely misplaced – that none of the possible successors to Ms Bhutto as PPP leader want to burn their bridges to the military, and thereby destroy the possibility that they will replace Benazir Bhutto as Washington's candidate for Prime Minister in an alliance with Musharraf or a military successor.

A question in this regard however, is whether an absolutely explicit secular alliance between Musharraf and Bhutto is a good thing for the struggle against Islamism and terrorism and extremism in Pakistan, or whether it will only further inflame Islamist feeling and make it less possible to split the Islamist camp between extremists and moderates (or pragmatists).

I have no clear answer, but the question is worth raising, for at present, as we saw over the Red Mosque episode, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal

(MMA—United Action Front), the Islamist coalition/alliance which runs the government of the NWFP, has been careful to distance itself in public from terrorism and from the most extreme groups like those who seized the Red Mosque.

If, however, the MMA parties saw themselves being excluded from power and patronage, the temptation for some of them at least openly to join the extremists would be considerably heightened.

This leads to another critical question: What sort of strategy should in fact be adopted by Pakistan against Taliban and extremist support in the tribal areas. Is it best to follow the strategy of “Divide and rule” adopted by the Pakistani state in the past, and favoured by most of the military for the future, and try to split off from the Taliban those local Islamist forces regarded as less committed to it? Or is the US administration right in advocating a blanket approach to “cracking down” on the extremists in that region? This debate mirrors to a considerable extent the disagreement between Britain and the US over strategy in Afghanistan, between those who would like to split off “moderate” Taliban elements as against those who treat the Taliban as a whole as an implacable foe.

Both approaches involve limited chances of success as against very real dangers. The problem of the Pakistani approach has become obvious. Agreements with “moderate” Taliban have done almost nothing to stop infiltration into Afghanistan; and at least since the Islamist backlash following the storming of the Red Mosque, they do not even seem to have prevented attacks within Pakistan itself.

The danger of a blanket “crackdown” approach is however even greater: namely, the risk that a significant part of the army will not go along with it, and may even mutiny in protest. Military revolt by lower ranks against the high command raises the greatest threat to Pakistan – indeed the only real threat in the near-to-medium terms to the viability of the existing Pakistani state. The Pakistani Army is a disciplined and obedient force, not like some African armies. But it would not be prudent to push it too far against its own sentiments.

May there then be a case not for a PPP–Musharraf alliance against the Islamists, but for a new push to split the Islamist camp in Pakistan by bringing the MMA into central government. This would create a coalition between the MMA and Musharraf’s existing bloc, the Pakistan Muslim League (Qaid-e-Azam) (PML-Q) (basically an alliance of landlords and urban bosses), and might involve bringing Nawaz Sharif back from exile to lead it, under Musharraf’s presidency (admittedly, a prospect even more difficult in personal terms than an alliance between Musharraf and Bhutto).

The point of coalition building with the MMA is both to split the Islamist camp, and because while the MMA may not be very strong in terms of parliamentary seats, the Pakistani parliamentary scene is so fragmented that the MMA could find itself in a position in which it could hold the balance of power. Its support will certainly be important to any future coalition which does not include the PPP.

Finally, we need to recognise that any effective and lasting Pakistani government, of whatever political complexion, has to include the army as a *de facto* partner in power.

Short-term predictions about the immediate future are hazardous in the extreme, but whatever happens, the army will continue to play a leading role. Whether you call it a return to democracy – I have real problems with that word in Pakistan – or whether you call it a return to civilian government, whether Musharraf is President, or whether Musharraf goes, the army will remain the single most important institution in Pakistani society.

As the only modern Pakistani state institution that actually works more or less as it is meant to, the army is vital to the working of the state in general, and especially of course to anything involving an armed struggle against Islamist extremism and terrorism. Any idea that Benazir, or any other Prime Minister, can come in and simply tell the army what to do and the army will salute and say “Yes” is absurd in terms of Pakistan’s history and present realities.

But what if a deal is not made and trouble spreads? “Trouble” is by no means just Islamist trouble. As we saw earlier in 2007, there is a continuing potentially explosive situation in Karachi, between the Sindhis and the Mohajirs, or at least between the PPP and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), which a PPP government could exacerbate. The murder of the Sindhi Benazir Bhutto makes this danger even greater. For there is always a tendency, on the part of those people in the army and elsewhere who are determined to stop the PPP, to try to use the MQM as an anti-Sindhi force in Karachi and cause clashes, ethnic riots, even massacres. We have already seen that kind of trouble beginning again in recent months. We may also see a growth of what might be described as armed protest in Baluchistan, as well as the spread of Islamist unrest and terrorism. This will involve not a united revolutionary movement against the state, but a wide breakdown of order in many different areas and a situation in which mass movements from different directions are fighting against each other and at the same time agitating against the present government.

Whether elections still take place, or whether Musharraf postpones them, if the situation continues to deteriorate and massive trouble spreads to northern Punjab, then ultimately I believe one of two things will happen. They are not difficult to predict because they have happened so often before. The first, and overwhelmingly the more likely, is that Musharraf receives a visit from the High Command of the Pakistani Army. They tell him what they told Ayub Khan: “Sir, we respect what you have done for the army and for Pakistan, but looking at the situation, it is time for you to step down for the good of the army and the country. If you do that, we will guarantee your personal safety and that of your family.” Of course, Ayub Khan was not facing a terrorist threat, but he had had a fair number of people shot down the years. Nonetheless he lived peacefully to the end of his days in his villa in Islamabad.

At that point, I believe Musharraf would go, he wouldn’t try to hold out. Even if he retained considerable support in the High Command, if enough

generals wanted him to go and were willing to say so to his face, he would go. But I also believe that if enough generals asked him to go and he refused, then, with equal respect and a measure of affection, he would be assassinated. But I don't think that would be necessary. Musharraf is deeply loyal to the army and devoted to its corporate interests.

The army would then orchestrate the succession to Musharraf, just as they have done on several occasions in the past. But who would the army try to bring in to succeed Musharraf? In this context, it would be unwise to write off Nawaz Sharif. It is difficult to imagine him working with Musharraf, who overthrew him in 1999 and whom he detests. But with Musharraf gone he would be a very attractive figure to many generals, just as he was after Zia's death in 1988. He is extremely determined and above all has a very strong northern Punjabi base. That should never be forgotten. With 63 per cent of Pakistan's population, Punjab is the pivot to Pakistan and with some 75 per cent of the rank and file, northern Punjab is the pivot of the army.

If Nawaz could stitch up a deal with the people who broke from him when Musharraf took power, meaning the rest of the former PML, including the followers of the Chauduries of Gujrat, he could still be the leader of a future coalition against Benazir, with army backing.

This would be especially possible if, as appears from the latest news, the Saudis still regard Nawaz as their potential candidate for future Prime Minister. Saudi backing makes a tremendous difference from two points of view. One is straight finance, the other is that they have a certain ability to put pressure, not on the terrorists, but on the Islamist parties – once again above all when it comes to financing them, or allowing private groups in Saudi Arabia to finance them.

The underlying structure of society and power

It will be noted that so far I have said almost nothing about the nightmare scenario which dominates so much of Western media reporting and policy discussion, namely an Islamist revolution, the collapse of the existing Pakistani state, and the passing of its nuclear deterrent into the hands of extremists. This is because I think this scenario highly unlikely, and only possible in the context of a massive and prolonged violation of Pakistani territorial sovereignty by US ground forces in pursuit of the Taliban. Barring such a catastrophic development, Pakistan is actually a great deal more basically stable than the extreme surface volatility of its politics would suggest.

When I visited the country in 1988 we were talking about a transition from military rule to rule by Benazir Bhutto or Nawaz Sharif, leading parties overwhelmingly dominated by rural landlords and urban rentiers with a few industrialists. Modern mass party politics were restricted to the urban Mohajirs of Karachi, grouped in the MQM, and the Islamist modernisers of the small but highly organised Jamaat Islami. Twenty years on we were talking about the same scene and the same prospects until Benazir Bhutto was assassinated.

This is not just chance. It reflects the fact that Pakistani politics, and power within Pakistan, have been dominated over the 60 years since independence by the same socio-economic elites. Except for a brief interlude in the early 1970s, these have continued to rule the country whichever civilian or military regime has been in power.

These groups have of course changed over time, but they have not changed nearly as much as the volatility of the surface politics would suggest. Pakistan is essentially ruled at the local level, and to a considerable extent at the national level, by an interlocking set of clans. These are not just the rural "feudal" clans of which one hears so much but also urban clans – partly because even the better-off "feudal" clans draw their actual cash from urban property. It is not agriculture which brings them most of their money.

These clans live off a mixture of their own property and access to state patronage and jobs, which they take for themselves or distribute to their followers (or, in the old Roman phrase, "clients"). They use their influence over the authorities, courts and police to protect their followers against their neighbours or by state forces. They reward them above all with patronage drawn from the state. This consists not just of jobs, but access to water, of critical importance to so many.

At the national level the parties are also based chiefly on patronage, with ideology playing a real but distinctly secondary role. The political biographies of many leading Pakistani politicians shows a constant tendency to flit from party to party, and government to government, according to which one can make a more credible offer of patronage.

That is why Pakistani society is so stable but Pakistani governments are so unstable. Society is stable because the groups which control it have a core vested interest in opposing any radical change. Governments are unstable because in the long run there is never enough patronage to go round. Every government comes to power making extravagant promises to gain support, and then cannot possibly fulfil all of them. Many are bound to feel dissatisfied or slighted. Over time, they come together in coalitions to overthrow the existing government and re-divide the patronage pie.

This structure of clan control and patronage – in some ways reminiscent of the world of 15th century England described in the letters of an East Anglian gentry family, the Pastons¹ – has provided Pakistan with a remarkable degree of underlying stability. It is also a critical factor in resisting the threat of Islamist revolution. One reason why the Islamists have not spread to the countryside is that the local land-owning clans are totally opposed to the radical land reform agenda of the Islamists (or at least their Jamaat Islami wing). The landowners are not only opposed to a local mullah preaching revolution, they are also in a position to prevent this, firstly through their control of the appointment of mullahs and secondly by their control of the local police and the tough measures they can employ if necessary. In that respect they are in the same position as 18th century English landlords dealing with radical Protestant preachers advancing the virtues of egalitarianism and the distribution of land to the peasants.

A key problem is that while in one way the rule of these inter-locking clans is very positive for Pakistan because it prevents revolution and chaos, in other

ways it is intimately linked to failures of economic progress, reform of the state, reform of society, and social progress in general. All of these have been severely retarded by a ruling class which either has no interest in modernisation or is actively opposed to it – and this is very nearly as true of the populist landowners in the PPP as it is of the conservative landowners in the PML – who over time have in any case very often been the same people. It is these deeper structures of Pakistani society, much more than the identity of governments which have been the most important obstacle to Pakistani progress. For every government institution except the military has been to a considerable extent hollowed out by the actions of these clans and their incessant search for state favours.

Pakistan's lack of progress should admittedly not be overdrawn. Once again, this is not sub-Saharan Africa we are talking about. Under Musharraf and his very able Prime Minister, Shaukat Aziz, impressive economic growth has taken place. If only this could be continued for a generation, Pakistani society and Pakistan's culture would be transformed. Moreover, when making the inevitable comparison between Pakistan and India it is also worth remembering that most of Pakistan should not be compared with the successful parts of India like Bombay and Bangalore; given the general background of Pakistan and where it is situated, it would be fairer to make the comparison with Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. And compared to these very backward and violent areas, much of Pakistan is actually doing rather well. Unfortunately, however, this is not true of the Pashtun areas from where the Islamists draw most of their strength. Even in the best circumstances bringing stable growth to these regions would be the work of many years.

Threats to overthrow the system

As to threats to overthrow this whole system: The PPP tried to overthrow the system in the 1970s under Bhutto *père* and abandoned the attempt in favour of a compromise with the landowning and urban elites. Zulfikar Bhutto himself was a great landowner. He hated much of his own class for personal reasons, but he did not create a modern reformist mass party. It is not clear whether this was because of his own class prejudices or whether he just couldn't manage it, given Pakistani social realities and the power of those same elites. Whatever the reason, the PPP is not a modern mass party, but a dynastic party like several others in the subcontinent. It has repeatedly backed away from radical social and economic change, which is not surprising if you look at the class background of the great majority of its leadership. These are Filipino-style landowning populists, not serious reformers.

The army too has never really tried to overthrow the system, though it has backed some fairly radical forms of capitalism under Ayub and now under Musharraf. But it has never tried to carry out a Kemalist-style revolution as in the Turkey of Ataturk (Musharraf's professed role model) or a "White revolution", of the kind pursued in different ways by both Reza Shah and his son in Iran. None of Pakistan's military rulers have seriously attempted to create their

own mass parties. Instead, like Musharraf, they have put together alliances formed from the existing political and social elites.

This is for two reasons. Firstly, in Turkey and Iran the state was able to rely on a nationalism which cannot be generated in the case of Pakistan, because Pakistan is not a nation, it is a federation.

In some ways it is a much more successful federation than many people think, given the very disparate elements of which it is composed. There is no such thing as Urdu nationalism, for the overwhelming majority of Pakistanis Urdu is a second language, a learned language, not as alien as English but still not native. It binds the country together, but unlike Turkish nationalism, cannot be made the basis for a national revolution. On the other hand, an attempt to base a revolution on Punjabi sentiment, even if successful in Punjab, would simply tear the country apart.

The other reason for the failure of the army to carry out a revolution is that the army itself has always had a deep stake in the existing socio-economic system. For a long time, from British days on, the officer corps was drawn from the landowning gentry elite, and therefore obviously opposed to social reform.

Now, in general, the officers are not aristocrats like Ayub Khan but – like Musharraf – middle class. In principle, therefore, they might be willing to contemplate radical reforms aimed at smashing the domination of the rural gentry and the urban bosses. However, since Zia ul Haq, the army as an organisation has itself moved very heavily into landownership and corporate business. The corporations which it runs are actually pretty efficient by Pakistani standards. By distributing well-paid jobs to retired soldiers they are also very good at keeping the army happy – which if you worry about African-style mutinies is a good thing. But good or bad, it certainly helps identify the army with existing structures of social and economic power in a way which rules the army out of a revolutionary programme, except in radically changed circumstances.

So the only powerful force with a revolutionary agenda is the Islamists. But once again, we are not in Algeria in the early 1990s or in Iran in the late 1970s. There are however two possible scenarios for state collapse, one short to medium term, one longer term. In the next decade or so, the only way the existing state itself can be overthrown is if the army splits. As long as the army stays united, the state will remain united because in the end the army will kill enough people to keep the state together. And the Pakistani Army, whatever its other faults, is an impressively disciplined and solid institution which through most of Pakistani history has been loyal and obedient to its own generals.

How might the army split? The only way I can see that happening is if, as a result of Taliban activity in Afghanistan, America were to launch a really large-scale and long-term military incursion on the ground into Pakistani territory. I don't mean something like a brief American raid into the tribal areas to attempt to recover captured US prisoners. That would cause great unhappiness, but would be tolerated by the army, especially if the army was associated with the operation in some way.

The situation would however be very different if future US action resembled anything like the wilder suggestions flying around in the US Congress – and expressed by Senator Barack Obama – of “Going in and cleaning out the Taliban support in the Tribal areas.” I hope and believe that this is a remote possibility, but if it did happen, then, according to one Pakistani with very close links to the military with whom I spoke in May, captains, majors and possibly lieutenant-colonels would go to their commanding officers and saying

We are going to fight the Americans. We offer you a choice: you can let us go and promise that those who survive will not face court-martial and will be accepted back into the army. In that case we will take our weapons, but we will leave our uniforms behind. Or you can refuse to let us go, and try to prevent us by force. In that case we will go in uniform, as military units.

At that point, the army splits and the whole show comes down. The Pentagon is well aware of this kind of thing and is briefing repeatedly against anything like an incursion into Pakistan. So it is not likely, but it is not completely impossible, if the speeches of Obama and others are to be believed.

As to the long term, by which I mean two generations, the greatest threat is one which is almost never talked about in Pakistan in this context. This absence really illustrates how essential it is to bring together the different strands of our foreign policy mentality, our whole world view. This factor is ecological change, and above all water shortages.

According to a very sober study by the World Bank a couple of years ago, if present trends in water supply in Pakistan continue over the next two generations, and are exacerbated by global warming (in ways which seem overwhelmingly probable if one looks at what is happening to the Himalayan glaciers) then at the end of this century 250 million people will be living in a country much of which will be as dry as the Sahara desert. If this happens, then we will most probably begin to see the sort of general melt-down of the state and organised society we have seen in Somalia and parts of Sudan in recent decades. Quite apart from the insuperable social and economic problems that such a meltdown would have for the rest of South Asia, as in Somalia, radical Islamist groups would almost certainly be among the chief beneficiaries.

You can say that all this is so far off that it is not worth bothering about; except that our fundamental and most important nightmares when it comes to Pakistan is control of its nuclear weapons, combined with the actions of Pakistani terrorists on our own soil. A hundred years from now Pakistan will most probably still have nuclear weapons; and many British cities will most probably still be to a considerable degree extensions of Pakistan.

NOTE

1. Norman Davis (ed.), *The Paston Letters*. Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1999.