

‘Counter-insurgencies’ in Pakistan

At a time when insurgencies have been making headlines across south Asia, it is useful to identify some historical and geographical patterns of such conflicts in Pakistan. State security forces have been engaged in counter-insurgency operations for 20 out of the last 35 years, and currently face two sets of insurgencies. A review suggests that there are a few positive commonalities between the various insurgencies in terms of the identity of the insurgents and their support bases, their organisational structures, ideologies, demands or methods. There are interesting patterns, however, in the state’s approach to counter-insurgency, and in where these otherwise disparate insurgencies fit into the broader body politic of the country.

HARIS GAZDAR

In the 35 years since the birth of the “new” Pakistan – following the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 – the military has ruled the country for nearly 19 years. These were years when a serving army chief was the effective chief executive of the state. Elected civilian leaders were in charge for around 15 years, and various interim and transitional governments accounted for about one year. This is well known and much commented upon.

What is less well acknowledged, however, is the fact that in 20 out of these last 35 years, there were military operations between Pakistan’s security forces and segments of the citizenry. Taking a deliberately conservative definition of “military operations” one might exclude army takeovers and the associated violence perpetrated on civilians in order to sustain those takeovers. The use of the military for the “policing” of class, ethnic or sectarian conflicts also does not automatically qualify. “Military operations” are defined here to exclude situations when security forces have been deployed as armed policemen, or to provide emergency cover, but to refer to active “counter-insurgencies”.

Diverse Range of Conflicts

Between 1973 and 1977 there was an insurgency in Balochistan, focused

particularly on the districts of Khuzdar and Kohlu, but with widespread support. The insurgency was sparked off by the dismissal of the elected provincial government. From 1983 till around 1989, the army was on counter-insurgency mode in rural Sindh, even though there was no well-defined insurgency in progress. The military action started with the suppression of civil non-violent protests known popularly as the “MRD movement” (Movement for Restoration of Democracy), and ended up as operations against “outlaws” and “dacoits”. Then there was a continuous string of military operations in Karachi between 1992 and 1996 against the MQM, known at the time as the Mohajir Quami Movement. Currently, there are separate active counter-insurgency operations in Balochistan and in the Pashtun tribal area of Waziristan. These date, roughly speaking, from 2003.

While there are some apparent commonalities between the five “insurgencies” identified here, these do not survive scrutiny. Apart from the inevitable claims of the ubiquitous but invisible foreign hand – which cannot be analysed precisely because it remains invisible – even the official version does not show up any obvious patterns. Balochistan 1973-77 was dubbed a separatist movement, Sindh 1983-89 as a fight against banditry, and Karachi 1992-96 as a campaign against ethnic terrorism and urban crime. The current

Balochistan insurgency is led, according to the government, by three disgruntled Baloch sardars (tribal chiefs) who are opposed to development. The official view on the Waziristan operation is that it is aimed at foreign Al Qaida terrorists and their local supporters.

It might be argued that most of the “insurgencies” share some project of ethnic sub-nationalism, aimed ultimately at secession. Both leftist and rightist versions of this argument have been implicitly present in how protagonists have positioned themselves in these conflicts. In the two Balochistan insurgencies, the 1980s MRD movement in Sindh, and to some extent in the Karachi conflict in the 1990s, the “national self-determination” rhetoric of the left was certainly present on the side of the “insurgents”. Some outsiders have even interpreted the Taliban and their supporter insurgents in the Pashtun tribal belt of Pakistan as Pashtun nationalists in Islamic garb. There is a right wing view that concurs – by labelling all of these various movements as wanting to “break” or “territorially weaken” Pakistan.

In fact, while ethnicity is an important political variable across Pakistani politics, apart from the two insurgencies in Balochistan, “national self-determination” has not figured as a significant demand anywhere. The MRD movement in Sindh in the 1980s was substantially a protest against general Zia’s military dictatorship. Ethnic Sindhis were at the forefront and Sindhi nationalist slogans were popular, but the leadership was firmly in the hands of Bhutto’s federalist PPP. The Karachi conflict of the 1990s was quite largely about ethnicity – or the assertion of ethnicity-based claims on the part of the Urdu-speaking community. But here too the main sources of unrest were perceptions of unfair resource allocation and ethnic discrimination against the Urdu-speaking Mohajirs. The current conflict in Waziristan is “ethnic” only insofar as it is linked to the power struggle between Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns in Afghanistan. It does not really implicate ethnic politics in Pakistan.

Even in the two Balochistan conflicts “national self-determination” has remained an outside option – a rallying cry, or a warning – on the part of the insurgents and

their supporters. While Baloch ethnic identity and perceptions of injustice with the Baloch people are recurrent themes, all of the concrete demands of the parties in conflict remain within the constitutional framework of Pakistan. These demands are about strengthening the provincial government, ensuring more favourable resource transfers, the withdrawal of coercive state agencies, and the guaranteeing of the collective interests of the ethnic Baloch community.

In fact, the five cases of conflict are so diverse that it is arguable if they all even qualify for the label “insurgency”. Even if these conflicts were not all insurgencies, however, it is clear that the state response in each case was certainly of the “counter-insurgency” type. The matter, in each case, was perceived as a threat to state security. Political possibilities were quickly abandoned in favour of coercive action. Most importantly, however, the analysis of conflict moved effortlessly to the implicit condemnation of an entire community.

Military Response

The response inevitably involved the large-scale deployment of troops, the setting up of operational bases, and the use of heavy military equipment. Air power has been used in all of these counter-insurgency campaigns except the one in Karachi, though other military equipment such as armoured personnel carriers were used here. They have all led to large numbers of civilian casualties that have often gone undocumented. Families and entire communities have been displaced, and large numbers of people arrested and tortured. There have also, inevitably, been numerous casualties among security personnel, and it is often alleged that many of these have been concealed for propaganda purposes. During all of these counter-insurgencies, including those in urban areas, local civil administrations have lost their writ to the “insurgents”, the security forces or to both.

Perhaps the most striking commonality between the two Balochistan insurgencies, the MRD movement in Sindh in the 1980s, the Karachi operations of the 1990s, and the Waziristan conflict is the nature of the response. It is remarkable that the state has been willing and able to elevate diverse political and civil conflicts to the level of “insurgency” almost by the virtue of adopting a posture of “counter-insurgency”. The transition to counter-insurgency has grave

implications. It requires the belief that violent rebellion is the principal activity of the other side, and that the primary actors on the other side are armed combatants. It requires the suspension of any meaningful distinction, as far as the other side is concerned, between political demands and civil conflicts on the one hand, and military tactics on the other.

Most importantly, the boundaries between combatants and civilians are blurred, and concern for civilians goes only as far as claiming to restrict collateral damage. While discussing the deaths of women and children in a Waziristan village in the course of an interview, general Musharraf referred to those losses as “collateral damage”. During the 1990s Karachi conflict, idle chatter about inflicting “thousands of casualties” did not raise too many eyebrows in Islamabad drawing rooms.

What allows a state to perpetually treat internal political conflicts as though they were insurgencies? How is it possible to go from one segment of the citizenry to the next, declaring each disparate group a permissible target for collective punishment? Pakistan, of course, is not the only state in south Asia to have to answer this question. Much of what is said here is true of all of the major countries in the region. Another look at the pattern of counter-insurgencies in Pakistan, however, reveals something about the dynamics of state power in the country.

Dynamics of State Power

There are three noticeable features about the review of counter-insurgency in Pakistan. First, counter-insurgencies have been present during military as well as civilian governments. There were only six years in the last 35 when there was a civilian government and there was no counter-insurgency. Second, the counter-insurgency mode of response has been intrinsically linked to the political legitimisation of the military even during periods of civil government. Third, every single case of counter-insurgency has occurred outside the province of Punjab.

The absence of counter-insurgency in Punjab can be interpreted in a positive light. Punjab, after all, is home to around 56 per cent of the country’s population, and the fact that a majority of the citizens has been protected against the counter-insurgency mode of the state is certainly a good thing. There are, of course, conflicts as well as dissent in Punjab, but the

important thing is that the state’s response has rarely, if ever, made the transition to “counter-insurgency” mode.

There might be any number of reasons for this. The bulk of the security forces are recruited in Punjab, and that is where most of the officers come from. Another argument often made is that Punjab is relatively well looked after in terms of resource allocation and does not have much to complain about. This is obviously not true, as empirical analyses of poverty and social development show that the conditions of the people of Punjab are not dramatically different from other parts of the country. In fact given its sheer size, Punjab accounts for most of the poverty and backwardness in Pakistan. If the establishment of a stable democratic system promises to bear social and economic fruit – and there is much to say that it does so in Pakistan – then Punjab has more to gain than most.

Whatever the reasons for it, an analysis of the political implications of the relatively lighter hand on Punjab may aid a better understanding of state power in Pakistan. Punjab is, for obvious demographic and historical reasons, seen as the “core” of Pakistan, and the rest of the country as the “periphery”. It is Punjab and not all the other “trouble-spots” that would be the principal site of political contention. Any significant mobilisation in Punjab against the military, or any other form of status quo for that matter, would lead to decisive change. The rest of the country, including Karachi, matters much less, and can be dealt with much more harshly.

Paradoxically, the perpetual “counter-insurgency” in the rest of Pakistan has been an unwitting prop of the military’s political power in the country. There is a balance of fear in which political players in the “periphery” are taught to acquiesce to the coercive power of the state. Political classes in Punjab, on the other hand are taught to fear the unruly “peripherals” who are always ready to challenge the state, and by extension threaten Punjab. It is this fear of the peripherals that prevents the political classes in Punjab from challenging the status quo. This does not mean, of course, that the people in the periphery will stop raising their political demands, or even that “counter-insurgency” will always prevail over “insurgency”. A system of governance built upon a balance of fear will always be unstable even if it happens to have endured thus far. [\[P7\]](#)

Email: gasht@yahoo.com