

Swat Valley Autonomy Is Cause for Concern

by Ramtanu Maitra

On Feb. 16, Pakistan's North West Frontier Province (NWFP) government and the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat Muhammadi (TNSM), a Wahhabi¹ organization, agreed to implement Islamic Sharia laws in Malakand division, which includes the picturesque Swat and two other districts, Chitral and Dir. Malakand is situated north-west of Pakistan's capital, Islamabad.

TNSM leader Sufi Muhammad said the NWFP government has also agreed to form a committee to work towards freeing captured Taliban, the leading Pakistani news daily, *The Daily Times*, reported.

Subsequently, Islamabad agreed to an indefinite ceasefire in the Swat Valley and, in essence, has handed over the area to the Taliban Tehrik-e-Pakistan (TTP), which provides the gunpower to the TNSM. It has also been said that the 15,000 Pakistani military and paramilitary that were fighting the TTP in the Swat Valley for the last 18 months will be eventually withdrawn. This will give the TTP the writ to implement within Pakistan a parallel system that includes courts, police, and even an electric power-distribution network and road construction.

The state-supported installation of this state-within-a-state, where the authority of Islamabad will not prevail, and instead, the area will be under the control of the anti-U.S. Taliban, imposing Sharia law, has evoked concerns in Washington. The U.S. Special Envoy for Afghanistan-Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, who was in

1. According to one Islamic scholar, traditional Islam views religion as a pact between man and God and therefore in the domain of spirituality. In this belief, there can be no compulsion or force used in religion. From the time of the Prophet Mohammed, peace and tolerance were practiced between different religious groups, with respect to distinctions in belief.

Contrary to this, the Wahhabi ideology, which the TNSM follows, is built on the concept of political enforcement of religious beliefs, thus permitting no differences in faith whatsoever. In Wahhabi belief, faith is not necessarily an option; it is sometimes mandated by force.

New Delhi when the peace pact was signed, and had just left Pakistan, said, in a Feb. 19 interview with CNN, that Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari assured him the pact was an "interim arrangement" to stabilize the restive region.

"He [Zardari] does not disagree that the people who are running Swat now are murderous thugs and militants and they pose a danger not only to Pakistan but to the United States," said Holbrooke.

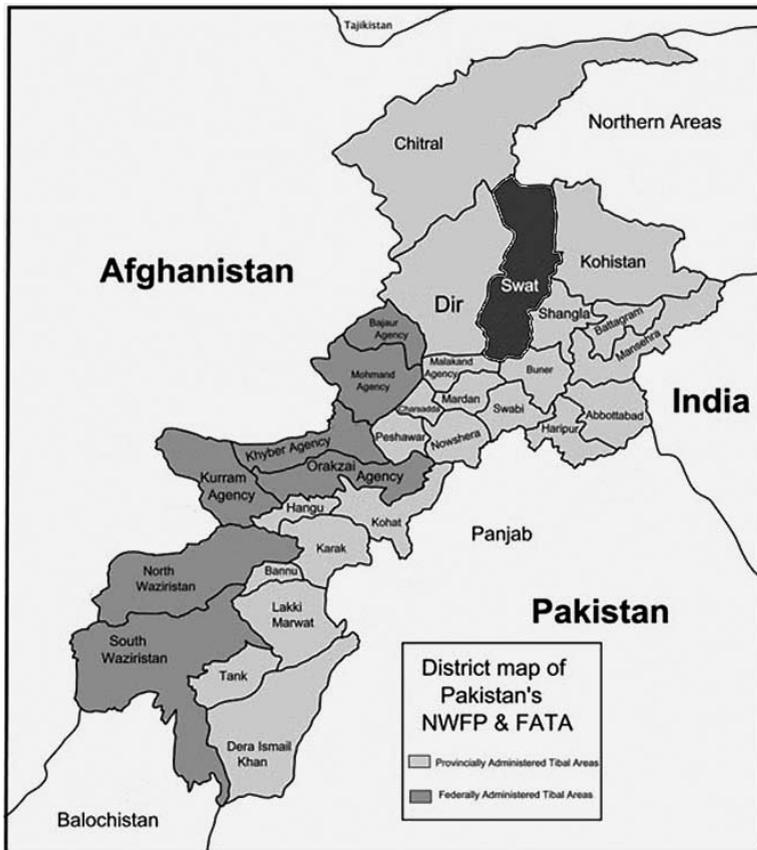
U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates was less critical. On Feb. 21, on the sidelines of a NATO conference in Krakow, Poland, to discuss troop levels in Afghanistan, Gates was asked if the Swat Valley pact succeeds in Pakistan, would the U.S. accept a similar deal in Afghanistan? Gates replied: "If there is reconciliation, if insurgents are willing to put down their arms, if the reconciliation is essentially on the terms being offered by the government, then I think we would be very open to that. We have said all along that ultimately some sort of political reconciliation has to be part of the long-term solution in Afghanistan."

However, what cannot be denied is that the pact ensured that the TTP will now have total control of the Malakand Division, which does not border Afghanistan, and has already established virtual control over almost all seven agencies of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and over a good part of the NWFP—all bordering Afghanistan, where some 80,000 U.S. and NATO troops are battling the increasingly powerful Afghan Taliban.

Swat's Background

Swat is a tract of land of the size of state of Delaware, butting the Peshawar border of the NWFP, consisting of the valley of the Swat River above its confluence with the Panjkora. This valley is some 70 miles long, varying from ten miles to a few hundred yards in breadth. It is intersected by ravines and glens, which bring down the drainage of the ranges on either side. The Swat River rises among snow mountains in the Kohistan, not far from the source of the Gilgit River.

The ancient name of Gilgit River was Suastos, and that of the Panjkora, was Ghoura. These names figure in the history of Alexander the Great's campaign. But since the Khyber became the main road from Kabul to India, Swat routes were no longer that important. Only the lower portion of the Swat Valley, where the river flows between Malakand and the passes leading to Dir from the Panjkora, were of military significance.



number of Afghan Taliban fighters and leaders, to move into Pakistan across the invisible Durand Line that separates Afghanistan from Pakistan. The proliferation of opium money in Afghanistan; the financial and military support lent by the Saudi-British-aided faction of the Pakistani intelligence agency and some retired Pakistani military officers to Pakistan's tribal Pushtuns, who later gathered under the TTP banner; the large number of deaths of innocent Pakistani and Afghan civilians in U.S. air strikes; and the weakening of the Pakistani Army, set the stage for the rise of the TTP.

On the other hand, the rise of TNSM was directly associated with the "Islamization of Pakistan" policy adopted by the virulently anti-Shi'a Pakistani military leader President Zia ul-Haq during his 12-year tenure (1977-88) at the helm of Pakistan. Under his rule, the erstwhile Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, and Zia became the beneficiary of gifts from the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Britain.

Having presented himself to his Western allies as the vanguard against Soviet communist expansionism, Zia, with the support of the Wahhabi-exporting Saudi Arabia, personally hand-crafted the growth of various vicious anti-Shi'a Sunni extremist groups all over the country. TNSM is a by-product of the same experiment.

The rise of the TNSM, and its alliance with the TTP, were also facilitated by the spineless Awami National Party (ANP), the much-vaunted, left-of-center, secular political party that won the NWFP 2008 provincial elections, handsomely defeating the fundamentalist alliance. The ANP's secularism had always been a ticket to do nothing. Following the successful campaign that provided the ANP a majority in the NWFP elections in 2008, it did nothing and, in essence, propitiated the militarization of the TNSM. Instead of imposing the rule of law, NWFP chief minister Haidar Hoti went to a high-level security meeting in Islamabad. In that meeting, when President Asif Zardari vowed to fight the militants to the finish, Hoti, instead, set about a plan to enforce Nizam-e-Adl in the Malakand division. And when the Swat Valley burst into violence and beheading became a daily routine, most of the ANP leaders fled the area.

The other factor that led to the militarization of the

Swat State was founded in 1915, by a *jirga* (council), after the ouster of the Nawab of Dir. The youngest of the Princely States of India, it had its own laws, its own justice system, army, police and administration, budget and taxes, and also its own flag with an emblem of a fort against a golden and green background. Swat remained a princely state more than two decades after Pakistan was formed, and was finally integrated into Pakistan in 1969.

Swat Valley in Turmoil

The people of Swat Valley had been demanding Sharia laws (Nizam-e-Adl) since the 1980s. In 1999, the NWFP government passed a Nizam-e-Adl act, but that did not fly. It could not be imposed because it conflicted with Pakistan's state laws. The emergence of the militant Taliban, headed by Sufi Mohammad's son-in-law, Fazal Hayat, now known as Mauana Fazlullah, gave the TNSM the necessary muscle. The followers of Fazlullah are also called the Black Turbans.

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 forced the foreign jihadis associated with al-Qaeda, and a large

Swat Valley must be attributed to the former Pakistani President, Gen. Pervez Musharraf. Following his take-over of Pakistan through a military coup in 1999, Musharraf, in 2002, arrested TNSM leader Sufi Mohammad and banned the outfit as a terrorist organization. At that point, Maulana Fazlullah took over the reins of the TNSM and resumed the struggle for the implementation of Sharia law, promised years ago by then-Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

During the Army commando raid at the Lal Masjid (mosque) in Islamabad in July 2007 against the fanatic Ghazi brothers, the two Mullahs in the masjid, Fazlullah went into action against the government forces to avenge the military action.

The Lal Masjid had two madrassahs—one each, for boys and girls. Reports indicate that a large number of boys and girls were killed during the raid, and many of those killed came from tribal families of the Swat Valley.

Fazlullah seized upon this opportunity, and assembled a large number of men, armed with Kalashnikovs and small arms, in his madrassah in the Swat Valley, and announced that it was time to go to war. His announcement that thousands of militants were ready to avenge the attack was followed by a series of suicide assaults on the security forces. Most of the anti-government rallies and demonstrations against the Lal Masjid operation were held in this region. It has also been pointed out that soon after the Lal Masjid raid, Fazlullah joined hands with the TTP, led by Baitullah Mehsud, in a bid to provide an umbrella to all insurgent movements operating in several tribal agencies and settled areas of the NWFP.

The Threat

The peace treaty and the withdrawal of Pakistani military and paramilitary, if it takes place, may pose a serious threat to the countries in the region, as well as to the stability of Afghanistan, at least as long the foreign forces remain stationed in that country.

On Feb. 21, a news report indicated that two major Pakistani Taliban groups based in Waziristan—the North Waziristan faction, led by Hafiz Gul Bahadar; and the South Waziristan faction, led by Mullah Nazir—have agreed to end their local feud with Baitullah Mehsud, the overall leader of the Pakistani Taliban. They formed a new group, the Shura Ittehadul Mujahideen (SIM).

In addition to the material and manpower support

that the Swat Valley would provide to the SIM, it is quite likely that the area will be used for providing a safehouse for many wanted terrorists. Since Islamabad's hands are tied by a ceasefire for an indefinite period, it would be impossible for the Americans to launch missile strikes against these terrorists, even if Washington comes to know of their exact locations. Since the Swat Valley does not border Afghanistan, the foreign troops based in Afghanistan may not be able to have any secret presence in the area.

Under such circumstances, the area can be used by other forces as well. For instance, since the 1990s, there was a massive growth in the conversion into Wahhabism in some of the former Soviet Republics. The pattern holds in Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Dagestan, Chechnya, and even, Azerbaijan. These Wahhabis, funded from Saudi Arabia through zakat money (alms) given to madrassahs, and abundant opium in Afghanistan, are backed by the gun-toting terrorists. In Central Asia, the Wahhabi-terrorist link-up is evident from the alliance between the Quran-distributing Britain-headquartered Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).

Both the HuT and the IMU have established bases throughout Central Asia, having a strong presence in the Ferghana Valley, Pankisi Gorge, and a number of other areas. It is revealing that in these areas, madrassahs are coming up fast, and the Tablighi Jamaat teachers are busy indoctrinating them with the Wahhabi version of Islam.

The Swat Valley ceasefire has made New Delhi uneasy. The ceasefire with the Taliban, Indian sources believe, is not likely to make the Taliban give up its ideology, weapons, or intent to undermine the Pakistani state. At the same time, the Swat Valley is contiguous to Jammu and Kashmir. New Delhi is concerned that the ceasefire agreement provides an additional opportunity to those who would like to rev up the disputed Kashmir issue.

The situation in all these areas has worsened due to the vast amount of opium that passes through Central Asia to Russia. The purpose of the trafficking opium into Russia is not simply to increase the level of addiction, but also to corrupt the societal and political system. Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, drug trafficking has increased multifold, but the terrorists have lost a safe abode. The Swat Valley peace agreement may provide the terrorists what they were looking for.