

Missing you already

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Pakistan is at war with itself, with blackouts, corruption and terror attacks. Now there are calls for the return of the reviled Musharraf



Pakistan has become a very unusual place. In Lahore, the heart of Pakistani cricket, the Sri Lankan cricket team was attacked in broad daylight by masked gunmen carrying guns and rocket launchers, because you never know when a rocket launcher will come in handy during an urban attack. The government had been warned of a potential terror threat but, true to form, ignored it. After killing eight people, mostly policemen, and wounding several others including the foreign cricketers, the gunmen ambled leisurely away. They were caught on CCTV camera calmly mounting their motorcycles and surveying the scene before deciding they had other places to be.

Immediately the cacophony of ludicrous claims hit the media. “The attack is to ruin our [the ruling party’s] image,” bellowed Raja Riaz, a Pakistan People’s Party hack. Er, no. “The motive was to damage the state of Pakistan and end cricket here,” said Imran Khan, head of the Tehreek-e-Insaf party. Er, no. The Pakistan cricket team are perfectly capable of ruining the state of cricket in the country on their own; masked gunmen are not required, thank you very much. Incidentally, on Monday night local police attacked the offices of Khan’s party brandishing Kalashnikovs and pistols. It’s probably not a coincidence that Khan has been openly critical of the Zardari government.

It’s fear. That’s what it is. It’s the state of a nation at war with itself. When vigilantes armed with sophisticated weaponry can attack a team of cricket guests (and there are no guests more esteemed in south Asia) in the middle of the afternoon, what they’re telling you is that no one is above the reach of the terror that has taken over Pakistan. It’s startling how adept this government has been at losing control of law and order, leasing out Pakistan’s stability for an

increased role in the war on terror in preparation for the troop surge in Afghanistan, and generally running the country to rot.

“Droned” is a verb we use now in Pakistan. It turns out, interestingly enough, that those US predator drones that have been killing Pakistani citizens almost weekly have been taking off from and landing within our own country. Secret airbases in Balochistan – what did we ever do before Google Earth?

The PPP-led government, hailed as being “democratic”, capitulated to the Pakistan Taliban’s demands for sharia law in the Swat Valley in February. There was no vote, no referendum, nothing. The government, tired of fighting those pesky militants who’ve been burning down Sufi shrines and local girls’ schools, just declared that a part of the country would be ruled no longer by federal law, but by a myopically interpreted and Taliban-approved “Islamic” code. And verily it shall be.

We’ve just had senate “elections”. Of course, there are no actual elections involved: the ruling party puts forward winners and they end up in parliament. On Monday, in a shock move, President Asif Ali Zardari’s former attorney, who defended the erstwhile criminal on corruption and murder charges, was made chairman of the senate. What a gas!

Meanwhile, with Delhi still beating war drums over the November Mumbai attacks, our former dictator/president Pervez Musharraf travelled to India recently, and there he warned our neighbours of an all-out war should they strike Pakistan. He also let us know that he is ready to return to the call of political duty. Outsiders might be confused at this change in the situation – what’s he doing there? Didn’t he resign in August? Here’s the beauty of it all: Musharraf’s re-emergence has many middle-class Pakistanis excited and hopeful. Is he back?! A series of op-eds in a local English newspaper (not highly censored because no one reads them) was titled “Why I miss Musharraf”. When a dictator tickles your fancy, you know something has gone very, very wrong.

So, the mood in Pakistan is one of confusion. How did we come to this? How do we get out?

On the eve of spring, it is the same problems that blight the country’s poor – there is no electricity, there is no potable water, and food inflation continues to rise. The newspapers warned us this week that “load shedding” in the summer will be some 15 hours long, which is not that bad considering the fact that we’re sitting in darkness for 12 hours a day now. Pakistan has long missed its millennium target goals of eradicating polio, largely because we can’t keep the electricity going long enough for the vaccines to be properly refrigerated, so they keep going bad. And we’re a nuclear country, a grossly corrupt one at that.

The press censorship continues unabated with future threats of an absolute blackout on any criticisms of the government safely enclosed within the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act that the parliament is currently sitting on. The bill, which imposes jail sentences from three months (for having an email account not registered in your real name) to the death penalty, and criminalizes the acts of “spoofing”, “spamming” and “character assassinating”, will apply to the width and breadth of the country and to any person, regardless of nationality or citizenship. It

will crack down on all objectionable – the definition of what is objectionable is typically vague – messages sent via, but not limited to, “electrical, digital, analogue, magnetic, optical, biochemical, electrochemical, electromechanical, electromagnetic, radio electric, and wireless technology”. So any subversive content found on cell phones, computers, or toasters will soon be illegal. Your head should be spinning by now.

Pakistan is in a dire situation. Religious extremism, violence and a faltering economy have made the state of affairs here decidedly grim. Joe Biden and John Kerry see American dollars as the only way of helping Pakistan stave off extremism; but Yankee aid donations and senatorial money will not help us now. It is estimated that President Zardari and his late wife, Benazir Bhutto, stole between \$2bn and \$3bn from the country’s treasury during their two previous stints in power. Now Zardari has claimed his personal wealth to be somewhere in the ballpark of \$1.8bn. Nawaz Sharif, leading coalition partner and head of the Pakistan Muslim League, declared his fortune to be not as grand, at only \$1.4bn. You do the maths.