

Obama is part of the problem

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War rages in the North-West Frontier and the poor are embracing the Taliban because they at least fix roads and discipline criminals. But if catastrophe is to be averted in Pakistan it is the corrupt elite who must be confronted



Carlos Marighella, the Brazilian writer, Marxist and guerilla revolutionary, could have been talking about Pakistan's present-day civil war in the North-West Frontier Province when he said: "It is necessary to turn political crises into armed crisis by performing violent actions that will force those in power to transform the military situation into a political situation. That will alienate the masses, who, from then on, will revolt against the army and the police and blame them for this state of things."

Pakistan's government, in the small league when it comes to the brain department, does

not understand that it has just entered into a guerrilla war in the Swat Valley and surrounding

areas, such as Buner, Mingora and Bajaur. The prime minister, Yousef Raza Gilani, who exists solely for photo opportunities as opposed to

policy decisions, has declared a military offensive to halt the growth of the Taliban along

Pakistan's northern frontier. This comes after the government ordered the release of Maulana Abdul Aziz, one of the ideological masterminds behind the infamous occupation of the Red Mosque in Islamabad in 2007 – a siege that ended bloodily when the Pakistan army stormed in and recaptured the building by force.

In addition, the Pakistani president, Asif Ali Zardari, who on a recent state visit to Washington pronounced himself “commander-in-chief”, unilaterally declared sharia law in the Swat Valley. Behaving in the manner of well-heeled south Asian dictators past, Zardari did not allow the citizens of the Swat Valley a vote. He did not call for a referendum. He simply capitulated to Pakistan’s indigenous Taliban.

Now, the country’s internally displaced population, estimated at one million-strong after US predator drones started flying freely over Pakistani skies last year, has shot up in the course

of just a few recent days. The United Nations is reporting the creation of an additional 500,000 refugees since the government began its own airstrikes against the people of the North-West Frontier Province. Not that this is necessarily disturbing for the government in Islamabad: in the same breath as Prime Minister Gilani declared war against his people, he asked international donors to pony up some cash to deal with the imminent human fallout from the crisis.

The US House appropriations committee has approved a speedy \$1.9bn of aid for Pakistan, aid that it assumes will go towards the cause of our growing problem with internally displaced people. It won’t. This government’s history of corruption is well known. Unlike Khaleda Zia and Hasina Wajed in Bangladesh, who are accused

of graft in the measly hundred-thousand-dollar range, obtained through kickbacks from government contracts, Zardari’s record is the stuff of legend and sits somewhere between two and three billion dollars, allegedly looted from the national treasury during his late wife Benazir Bhutto’s two terms in power.

Zardari’s sometimes ally/sometimes opposition leader Nawaz Sharif also allegedly worked in the big-stakes ballpark when it came to corruption. It doesn’t take an exceptionally sceptical mind to doubt where this frantic US handout of almost \$2bn is going to end up.

Pakistan is not going to win this round of conflict, not with this government in charge, not with the army battling an entrenched guerrilla force that is fighting on this terrain, with the added benefit of doing so in neighbourhoods that the guerrillas grew up in and in towns where their families live. The Pakistani Taliban, frightening as they are, are not an army fighting on

the orders of US Admiral Mike Mullen; they are defending a cause that they believe in. Fundamentalism does that to a soldier. Pakistan is

going to lose out for many reasons and President Barack Obama’s complicity will not change anything.

So far, the “Yes We Can” president has strictly upheld George W Bush’s modus operandi when dealing with Pakistan. The evidence is frustratingly damning: he signalled to Pakistan and the world during the White House buddyfest, which saw Zardari at his most unctuous, that he and his government will prop up their men in the region; that they will do so with “see no evil”

billion-dollar handouts and military support; and that, faced with fostering democracy in Pakistan, the US will always come down in support of the strongmen instead of the people.

Asif Ali Zardari is unelected. He was brought to the presidency in the same way as General Pervez Musharraf was – by the vote of a reliant and powerless parliament. Zardari did not stand for election in 2008. He does not represent a

constituency, and he does not have the mandate of the people. Ditto Sharif who, unlike Zardari, was disqualified from contesting elections.

Yet this did not seem to get in the way of Obama's pronouncement of generous support for the government.

Perhaps, as Pakistan "fights for its survival" (the catchphrase for this war), this is a moment for political pause. Two weeks ago I met a man who had just returned from South Waziristan. I asked him about the situation in his home

village and he complained about the arbitrary and constant US drone attacks. After telling

me that his house had been all but obliterated when a drone missed its mark, he continued, more upbeat, "But the situation there is improving. The law-and-order situation is very good, better than Karachi."

He told me about the case of a young

girl who had been molested by three men after being kidnapped from the market near her house. When the Taliban

forces discovered the crime, they not only rescued the girl and returned her to her home, but also took care of the three men.

"They shot them," my visitor told me, impressed that some form of retributive justice had been served, quickly and easily.

I shifted in my seat and, uncomfortably, disagreed that what had happened was the right outcome. For one thing, I said, women have been suffering greatly under the rule of these extremists. "Oh they're fine," he said, waving a hand

in the air. "They are grateful for the fact that they finally have basic justice and services, you know. They don't suffer year-long court delays and mercenary police like we do in Karachi."

So, Carlos Marighella was spot-on. The solution does not lie in the army fighting its own civilians, generating more hatred for a force that has been acting on the orders of foreign powers for the past eight years and alienating the people whom they are sworn to protect in the process. The solution does not lie in the United States funding and propping up corrupt and illegitimate governments in the face of incompetent leadership and unrest across the country. The

solution is not more money.

The solution lies, rather, in recognising that the residents of Swat didn't choose the Taliban. They did not vote for sharia law. The Taliban are only there because they built roads that had been unpaved for decades. They provided education, for boys at least, when the government schools failed millions of local children. They opened medical centres when the government hospitals shut down because of lack of funds. They meted out justice when the courts started protecting the government and not the people.

It's corruption, stupid. It's the force we need

to be fighting now; it's the head of the monster, the wellspring of the Taliban's strength in Pakistan. I for one don't plan on putting on a burqa any time soon.