

Tension and terror in Pakistan

Fatima Bhutto on why the pro-American government is at war with its own people



Eye of the storm: a Pakistani soldier patrols Mingora, the main town of the Swat valley.
Photograph: A Majeed/AFP/Getty Images

It all changed this year in April when the government decided to sign a deal with Islamic militants who had taken over the Swat valley, which allowed them to impose Sharia law in the areas they controlled. It set a terrible precedent of negotiating with people who have seized territory by force.

Then, a month after signing, the deal was rescinded and the army went in. Not only does that send conflicting signals, but to have the militants fighting against a Pakistani army that is backed by American airpower mythologises the Taliban in a way that is not at all helpful. It created a huge refugee population, but was then declared a success; now the army are doing the same thing in South Waziristan.

The deal with the militants and the fighting that followed revealed the extent to which Pakistan is now doing the bidding of the US. In a country where so much is centred around the national armed forces, to see the army so closely aligned with America was very ugly. The sight of Pakistani troops fighting other Pakistanis brought back terrible memories of the war in Bangladesh [which saw Pakistan split in 1971, amid widespread brutality].

It is simply embarrassing for a sovereign country to be told what to do or told who we are by another power. Richard Holbrooke [the American special envoy to the region] comes here and lectures us, telling us that we are supporters of the Taliban if we do not support legislation on Pakistan in Washington, and then lumps us and Afghanistan together in this new word "AfPak". It's a ridiculous term. We are two separate countries with not much in common.

The problem in places like Swat is very basic: the state has no presence at all, so the people there are dependent on non-state actors who fill the gap, providing education, law and order. These militant groups become the government.

Nonetheless I remain optimistic for the future of Pakistan. This is a young country, 62 years old. It is rich in resources, in oil, gas, in agriculture. It has a hugely capable population. This is not a failed country but a failed system of government. And that can be changed.