

This is not our kind of Islam

Sharia law was introduced to Pakistan undemocratically and without debate – but people are too frightened to protest

Last week, Pakistan earned another point on its scorecard as the world's most dangerous country. During what was supposed to be the start of a Lahore test match series, masked gunmen attacked the visiting Sri Lankan cricket team, killing five policemen and injuring several players. Not even cricket is safe in Pakistan now. In response, typically, Pakistan's government claimed shock at the violence. There was no mention of the warnings that the government had received of a potential attack, no mention of the violence that has rampaged across Pakistan's cities, and no talk of the almost casual escape the gunmen made, caught by CCTV cameras in the area. Instead, the interior minister, a feckless man with no political experience, declared that Pakistan was "in a state of war". Well, yes. It is. It has been at war for some time now.

In February, the government capitulated to the demands of Islamic militants who have been fighting the state in the Swat Valley for over a year and promised the promulgation of Sharia law in the valley. There was no vote, no referendum, no democracy in the matter. The government, who cannot fight the militants in Swat – it is too busy assisting the flight of Predator drones from internal airbases and making sure they hit their targets in Waziristan – just declared that federal law would be replaced by Sharia. No room for dissent or choice was given. The decision, however, is a redundant one; Pakistan's 1973 constitution stipulates that no law contrary to Islam can be enacted in the land.

It would seem that Pakistan is losing, quite rapidly, the battle against jihadist ideology. We now have our own, home grown, Taliban – the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, or Pakistan Taliban party. And now our country, one that was founded as a safe haven for Muslims, has become synonymous with the frightening prospect of Islamic militancy.

But the Islam I know is absent from Pakistan today. It's an Islam that western pundits might call moderate, but it seems pretty radical to me. It's an Islam that is peaceful and tolerant, a faith that derives its strength from poetic ghazals by Rumi, Hafez, and Iqbal, one that was once questioning and has the limitless power to be so again. That Sufi Islam, which has its roots in the shrines in Sehwan Sharif in the heart of Sindh, has been booted out of Pakistan. Instead, it has been replaced with fundamentalist, Taliban style, Wahhabi-inspired Islam, the kind that thrives on beheadings and fatwas, in short the very scary (Saudi) kind. Nato must be thrilled.

In February, a 42-year-old Polish geologist Piotr Stanczak was beheaded by the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan. His murder was videotaped and released to the public. Poland reacted with understandably fury: "The Pakistani government doesn't control these terrorists, these murderers" said the nation's foreign minister. That was before Sharia law was forced upon the Swat Valley. The Taliban executioners called it revenge for Poland's troops in Afghanistan. On Thursday, suspected Taliban militants blew up the shrine of a 17th century Sufi poet in Peshawar. Rahman Baba, the Sufi saint, is celebrated as one of the great poets of the Pashto language. He had nothing to do with troops in Afghanistan. But women frequented the shrine, and this, says the

Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, is an abomination. If we are not careful, girls' schools – over 200 of which have been blown up or destroyed in the North-West Frontier Province since this government took over – music, kite flying, women in the workplace, short-sleeved shirts, chess, teddy bears and poetry are next to go.

However, while millions of Pakistanis have taken umbrage at the depiction of their country's new super-militant status, not enough Pakistanis have taken a stand against the Talibanisation of their country. It has become unpatriotic to speak against Islam in any form in today's Pakistan. In Karachi, responses to the government's declaration of Sharia law in Swat have been muted. No one dares to say the unthinkable – it's a dangerous step. It was taken undemocratically. This is not our kind of Islam. It doesn't represent us, not in Pakistan.