

Knowing Swat in July 2010

Local Anger is Simmering on the Absence of Political Leadership:

“Thank you CRSS, because of you we are able today to meet our parliamentary representative after over two years.” This sentence in the beginning of a peace Jirga (traditional assembly) organized by the Centre on July 17th explained the state of affairs in the Malakand region. The speaker was Rehman Gul, a local teacher, and his addressee was Syed Jaffar Shah, member of the Khyber Pukhtunkhwa assembly. And the venue was the picturesque Kalam valley, some 90 kilometers north of Mingora, the administrative head quarter of Swat valley.

Swat has Changed within a Year:

Only a year ago, the valley wore a deserted look, primarily under the intimidating shadows of Mulla Fazlullah’s bandits. The gun-totting TTP fighters were spread all around – a brutal rule through intimidation, premised on their version of Islam. Some 200 hotels looked like haunted houses and most people sheltering outside the region.

The valley suffered terribly because of the hold of Taliban who tried to impose a strict brand of their own interpretation of Islam, slaughtered people, blew up schools and tried to push, an otherwise, progressive and prosperous region. Army action, starting in May 2009, produced a huge number of Internally Displaced People and that wrecked the local economy and the tourism industry. In July 2009, it all looked beyond repair.

But in July 2010 Kalam looks and sounds different. A musical night, coinciding with a Festival, the provincial government and the Pakistan army organized (July 11-July 18) to revive tourism and signal hope, was probably the best manifestation of how things have changed between the summer of 2007, when Fazlullah’s thugs began their high-handed campaign to outplay the government, imposing its skewed version of Islam on the residents. It left no option with the government but to send in the army to dislodge the TTP and terminate its occupation of vast territories from Mingora to Kalam to Shangla.

Summer of 2010 is Way Different – and Better – in Swat:

Summer 2010 basically marked the consolidation of gains of the massive, three-pronged military operation that had been launched in May 2009; the series of festivals between Mingora and Kalam underscore the military establishment’s resolve to prevent the loss of these territories to the militants again.

On July 18th, a week of festivities in Kalam culminated with a number of provincial ministers finally participating in the concluding ceremony of the Festival that attracted thousands of tourists from down-country. After a break of almost three years, Kalam resonated with jazz and folk music, with young Pashtoon and Punjabi enthusiasts literally dancing on the streets to the tunes of popular songs.

The festivities took place amid a heavy blanket of security, provided by the army and the special police that has been raised in the last two years.

Civil Society Organization can Lead the Social Rehabilitation Process:

On July 17th, as many as 120 representatives from various walks of life – teachers, farmers, writers and local elders - had gathered at a local hotel for the “peace jirga” to discuss problems and progress in Malakand since the military operation last year.

A vocal member of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa assembly, Jaffar Shah dared defied Taliban threats to personal security and attend the meeting. Addressing his constituents, Shah said that a strong civil society was the only panacea for permanent peace in Swat and that the achievements

“Every child in Malakand has become aware of what the game (of the militants led by TTP) was. This is our gain vis a vis forces that want to subject these regions to their skewed view of Islam,” Shah told the audience, underscoring the Taliban militants’ advances in the Malakand region until May last year, when the army finally mounted the operation Rahid Nijat.

Many Jirga members expressed their reservations about the army’s omni-presence and its authority over civilian matters in Malakand. “The provincial government had requested the army to move in to take on the militants, let there be no doubt about that,” Shah pointed out and said the governance authority would soon be transferred to the civilians. Shah also emphasized that there was no justification for the army’s permanent deployment across Malakand. Army is no solution for permanent peace but it will stay until it is essentially required by the provincial authorities. “What the combination of civilian and military leadership has achieved is the gain for Pakistan,” Shah explained, saying the biggest achievement was the turning of the tide against religious obscurantist elements. Integration of all stake-holders, he said, is a must for enduring peace and economic recovery.

Local Population is Unhappy with the Rehabilitation Process:

Mohammad Saleem, a research scholar and academic, explained to the participants of the Jirga that intellectual backwardness and failure to confront militants had piled misery on them.

“We shall all have to stand up united to challenge extremist forces,” Saleem said. He also bemoaned the slow-paced recovery effort. Out of the 401 totally or partially destroyed schools, only about 28 are currently under reconstruction. Provincial government says it lacks funds and that is obstructing quick recovery. Led by the World Bank, the international donor community is about to unveil a post-conflict need assessment (PCNA) that would hopefully open the way for release of millions of dollars and an accelerated recovery and reconstruction in Malakand

Most participants of the Jirga sounded bitter and wary of government statements on recovery, pointing to the bad road conditions between Mingora and Kalam. They also questioned as to how militancy intruded into a society equipped with at least 2,200 private and public schools. They also criticized the civilian and army authorities for not addressing some urgent issues. “We were asked to participate in the Kalam festival, but look at the roads, they are in bad condition,” said school teacher who had traveled from Madyan to attend the jirga.

Less than one-third of the 90 odd kilometers between the two towns is in a real bad shape and it also doubles the travel time. Corruption, absence of effective and quick legal justice system, neglect of education sector were some of the complaints that resonated in the jirga to the backdrop of the Kalam festival, that the Pakistan Army had organized.

Participants of the jirga not only vented their frustration with the slow reconstruction process but also pointed out some shortcomings. Following were some of the problems that jirga members pointed out, with a demand to address them urgently.

- Absence of civilian representatives / provincial government
- Deficient and stagnating education system
- Unemployment,
- Crime
- Absence of a functional and cost-effective speedy justice system
- Massive corruption
- Population explosion,
- An administrative infrastructure disproportionate to the exploding population,
- Neglect of the areas all Pakistanis take pride in, and educational decline.

- Economic Disparities because of the predominance of politics by the affluent landed aristocracy. It is a class war.
- Those disgruntled peasants who joined Taliban are still languishing in jails, whereas the influential affiliates of militants bailed out
- Community not being involved in the process.

What strikes you most upon entry in the Swat valley are the Pakistani flags, painted over walls and shop shutters. Also displayed are salutary slogans for the military for what it has done so far. Taliban had hoisted their black or white flags over homes and also forces residents to do so. This is the analogy that people draw between the military and militants. Both, say the most, appear as an intimidating force, and want the residents to live by their diktat. Taliban had hoisted their black flags all over and forced residents also to do the same.

One keeps wondering as to whether this act is necessary at all? And once you engage shopkeepers in Mingora, the administrative headquarter of Swat, most of them say they were forced to do i.e. painting walls and shutters in green and white. Most MPs refuse or are reluctant to participate in public functions for fears of security. But people at large reject this.

“Insecurity and risks to lives is one thing but politicians in particular also carry certain responsibilities vis-à-vis their constituent,” Malik Ameerzada, ex MPA said.

Center’s Interactions with Local People:

It is all fine. Most people we met in Bahrian and Kalam are all smiles about the resumption of tourism and business activity. But the peace and tourist activity has returned to Kalam, for instance, at a very heavy cost, and resulted in several negative perceptions about the overbearing role of the army.

Involvement in Malakand simply illustrates the story of a smart and efficient force i.e. the army which can easily shoot itself in the foot and discredit its own achievements.

It won accolades from all and sundry, including the top US military high command, for its stunning successes in Waziristan and Swat/Malakand. These operations also earned it unusual praise for dislodging terrorists and disrupting their networks in the two regions.

The army also has so far successfully held on to the regions it cleared of terrorists, of course including Malakand. It also has marshaled the area and managed to revive the tourist industry, by holding the Swat and Kalam festivals for two weeks. *That music and songs echoed throughout Kalam on July 17th and 18th.*

One perception, that resonates in almost every discussion, is the reservation of most of the best rooms in Kalam by the military establishment. Wherever we went almost every hotel manager turned us back by saying most of the rooms are reserved for the army.

While the army may have done so to ensure the presence of maximum number of people – friends and relatives – during the Kalam festival, this crude way of handling affairs has partially gone against the military and also dented its image. People at large are generally appreciative of army's role in the clearing and holding of vast swathes of Malakand from militants but they at the same time are also wary of the army's predominant role in the governance issues at the moment.

It is beyond one's comprehension as to why did the military establishment go for the kill (in its endeavour to ensure maximum outside participation)? Why couldn't the army, if at all, outsource the job to the private sector, to avoid the stigma of being the ultimate controller of the Peace in Swat? The word of mouth – particularly from hotel managers and other staff – was generally negative, primarily derision of the army. Most locals projected themselves as being the victims of the military's high-handedness. *Since perceptions are extremely important, one really has to tread the path to recovery with unusual caution.*

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Most MPs refuse or are reluctant to participate in public functions for fears of security. But people at large reject this. "Insecurity and risks to lives is one thing but politicians in particular also carry certain responsibilities vis-à-vis their constituent," Malik Ameerzada, ex MPA. Mohammad Saleem, a Swati researcher and academic, says the root cause is lack of implementation of existing laws and requisite legislation. "Unless the provincial government gets its act together on implementation and legislation front, it will be very difficult to address fundamental issues of governance and justice delivery,"

At a recent Jirga of Malakand influentials – academia, non-governmental organizations, educationists and people at large Jaffar Shah, the ANP MP from PA 85 constituency, clearly told the participants that the army acted in aid of civilian authorities. “The provincial government had requested the army to move in to take on the militants, let there be no doubt about that,” Shah , said at the jirga organized by the Centre for Research and Security Studies, and attended by about 120 representatives from various walks of life. “What the combination of civilian and military leadership has achieved is the gain for Pakistan,” Shah explained, saying the biggest achievement was the turning of the tide against religious obscurantist elements.

This victory against obscurantist elements – the change in perceptions about religious militants – is the biggest gain of the May 2009 operation and we all need to join hands to consolidate this gain, Shah exhorted the participants of the jirga at a Kalam hotel. “Every child in Malakand knows today what was the game (of the militants led by TTP) and this is our gain since elections in 2008,” Shah told an audience that comprised a lot of those very annoyed with the political leadership. What is the key? The key is for civil society including the political parties to forge alliance for taking the lead in governance. Therein lays our long-term salvation. Military is not the solution for permanent peace, Jaffar Shah argued at what was the first ever public consultation on the issues confronting Swat/Malakand today.

Khalid Mian:

Sofar others kept calling our jirgas as their seminars and conferences. We are happy that CRSS has taken the lead in getting us all together under the banner of traditional Pukhtoon jirga

It is quite possible to lose a war on the table after victory in the field.

Mohammad Saleem:

Strengthening of institutions responsible for security is the primary requirement for peace-building. People sitting in Islamabad can hardly empathise with us if they interact with us on our soil. It is ironical that the PEMRA laws extended to Swat only after the first Rahe Nijat launched in November 2007. Until then it was free for all

What were the Major Complaints?

What afflicts Swat? Major complaints:

- Absence of civilian representatives / provincial government
- Deficient and stagnating education system
- Unemployment,
- Crime
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- Community not being involved in the process. It is the army all over

One major question that haunts everybody is: With such high levels of literacy and over 2,200 schools, how could militants make inroads into the society?

As many as 2,200 schools in the Malakand division. Until 1969 merger into Pakistan, the region boasted a 21 % literacy rate, compared to rest of Khyber Pukhtoonkhwa's 11 percent.

Haroon Bacha, ex-Nazim/Academic:

Our woes were the result of years of a process that began with the Afghan jihad and went on unchecked until May 2009. "This has paralyzed our thinking, we have lost our identity." We need your support for healing wounds, he added and pledged that the people and society in Swat would never let the militants come back and claim stronghold in their area now. "The suffering was unbearable," he said and stated would never be repeated now. "When roads are missing, education is faulty and deficient, justice absence and economic disparity omnipresent, how can you hope to live a normal life."

Interjection by Jaffar Shah, Member Provincial Assembly:

Addressing a large “Peace Jirga” comprising representatives from all over Malakand (Saturday) and organized jointly by IBT and CRSS, Islamabad, at Kalam, Jaffar Shah said the military operation in May last year had helped people understand the real reasons behind the militancy.

The Peace Jirga was the first such initiative in three years and also the first gathering at the sprawling town of Kalam. “Every child in Malakand has become aware of what the game (of the militants led by TTP) was. This is our gain vis-à-vis forces that want to subject these regions to their skewed view of Islam,” Shah told the audience that comprised tribal elders, writers, academics and educationists from the Malakand Division. Many Jirga members expressed their reservations about the army’s omni-presence and its authority over civilian matters in Malakand.

“The provincial government had requested the army to move in to take on the militants, let there be no doubt about that,” Shah pointed out and said the governance authority would soon be transferred to the civilians. Shah also emphasized that there was no justification for the army’s permanent deployment across Malakand. Army is no solution for permanent peace but it will stay until it is essentially required by the provincial authorities.

“What the combination of civilian and military leadership has achieved is the gain for Pakistan,” Shah explained, saying the biggest achievement was the turning of the tide against religious obscurantists. Integration of all stake-holders, he said, is a must for enduring peace and economic recovery. Mohammad Saleem, a research scholar and academic, explained to the participants of the Jirga that intellectual backwardness and failure to confront militants had piled misery on them. “We shall all have to stand up united to challenge extremist forces,” Saleem said. He also bemoaned the slow-paced recovery effort. Out of the 401 totally or partially destroyed schools, only about 28 are currently under reconstruction. MP Jaffar Shah said lack of funds was the main reason responsible for slow recovery but promised it would pick up very soon.

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