

Criminalizing the female in Swat (April 7, 2010)

Abstract

Independent research related to the role and position of women in Swat during the recent past was undertaken¹. In this connection five focus groups composed of women only were held. The FGDs contained women from different categories of professions and areas so as to provide a balanced representative sample. The goal was to understand the conflict in Swat from the female perspective.

This research allowed a rare insight that helped us know how women were made the first and the primary target of militant penetration in Swat. This article examines from the point of view of criminology how a behavior pattern was created amongst the women of Swat that allowed militants like Mullah Fazalullah not only to create the first group of acolytes amongst them but also obtain funds and recruits with their assistance. This paper argues that the Pukhtun identity of the women was replaced by a more stringent anti feminine identity that led to keeping the female house bound and uneducated. This created a center of conservatism at the household level that paradoxically became the source of assistance for the Swat Taliban. Such a mechanism later ensured the recruitment of husbands and sons to the ranks of the militants due to the influence of the women. Thus unwittingly the female became an accessory to a criminal organization in Swat through her support and abetment.

About the author

Khalid Aziz is the Chairman of the Regional Institute of Policy Research and Training, Peshawar, NWFP. He is a former civil servant with more than thirty years of service. He has served as district magistrate and also as Political Agent in the tribal areas for a number of years. He also remained Chief Secretary of NWFP.

Khalid Aziz received his education at Peshawar, Oxford and Cambridge Universities and holds an M.Phil degree in Development Studies from Cambridge.

1. Introduction

The research into the causes of growth of militancy in Swat since its merger into NWFP in 1969 has identified a number of factors that were responsible for the breakdown of governance and the loss of control that took three decades to mature before reaching the break down point in June and July of 2009. At that point the authority of the state had completely disappeared. This was the point when the Pakistan military entered Swat and had to use its full might to wrest the Swat back from the control of the militants who were fighting under the banner of Tehrik e Taliban under the leadership of Mullah Fazalulah.

After an extensive survey carried out under the “Mulgaro Kor” project in Swat that included detailed discussions with communities, one obtained many insights however one of the most interesting one was how the militants very cleverly obtained the loyalties of the female population through the clever use of media by mixing it with self serving translations or interpretation from the Holy Quran.

The result was that women, who were ultimately victimized in this process, unwittingly became complicit in a cycle of crime when they began to follow the advice of Mullah Fazalulah by providing him support. The explanation for this paradox lies in the realm of criminology and abnormal psychology. Here we will study the outline of the process and the instruments used to achieve their goal of control over Swat. This paper thus shows what and how the will of the women was transformed. It thus provides lessons that will help in preventing a future relapse so that the lives of the female are enhanced and they have recourse to more positive outcomes in life.

The main purpose of this article is to examine how the induced behavior in the women led them into criminality and knitted the female to the militants more rigidly although the later lost no opportunity to abuse the female and made them the object of subsequent punishment and embargoes. This thwarted female development and limited her mobility and thus made her a virtual prisoner in her own house. It is argued that it was this subjective status that Fazalulah desired since it provided him ultimately with money and male recruits mobilized for him by the female; she encouraged men to join the militants since they were led to believe by the propaganda of "Mullah Radio" that it was a *just cause*. Our research into the processes used by the militants to gain dominance over women showed that it was based on the use of religion. It was misused through a cleverly crafted media strategy to exploit a women's special position in the household.

One would like to believe that this sad experience of abuse and exploitation would have subdued the support of the women of Swat for the militant's re-emergence; however interviews conducted in Swat show that unfortunately this is not the case. A large number of women still remain Fazalulah's supporters even after all that happened to them! Hence the government needs to take notice and win the media war through a well crafted strategy that makes the women aware of the dangers facing.

2. The Pukhtun Social Values

Freedom from violence and oppression is the choice of all human beings. However, occasions arise when manipulative actions create an involvement that drives people towards outcomes that ultimately makes them the subject of violence and oppression.

On the one hand a woman is considered to be the pivot of any family and its main actor; her task in Pukhtun society is to make her home a nursery for her children and a castle of comfort for her husband. The first two values that are universal however are conditioned by the cultural context of the Pathan value set and the position of women in that society.

Pathans operate under a very strong value set that is primordial and supersedes all other values and loyalties called Pukhtunwali. It is an honor code whose core value is "Badal" or revenge for any wrong perceived; its closure is not individual-specific and generates vendettas for perceived wrong that may last for generations. One of the most extreme insult in the lexicon of Pukhtunwali results from "Tor," or insult to a male's honor brought about by any of his female relations. The only expiation recognized in Pukhtunwali is death for both the male and female involved in the perceived insult.

The militants of Swat and associated with the Tariq-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is a collection of outlawed militant parties that operate in FATA and Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (KP, the new name for the province of NWFP) and operates under the leadership of Hakeemullah Mahsud. Since the

TTP is a Pukhtun party, it operates within the cultural construct of Pukhtunwali but modified for tactical advantages by making a local and a favorable interpretation of Islam.

Nevertheless, the Quranic injunctions pertaining to women have been modified to that extent to morph into Pukhtunwali tradition by the TTP. Prior to the Taliban injunctions regarding the conduct and dress code of women related to "Parda", Pukhtunwali provided more freedom. Due to the deterrence contained in Pukhtunwali related to "Tor," women went out in public spaces with head cover and that was au courant. They attended schools and colleges and had the option to undertake employment. This did not happen overnight as it took many years of modernization to make this change culturally acceptable.

Although women in villages of KP and FATA have to go out every day for long hours to collect wood for fuel that is needed for cooking and draw water from wells or springs for household consumption, yet men consider it offensive if another male sets his eyes on a female. In urban areas the low visibility of women is more obvious. This is especially true in provincial towns in KP. In FATA you would not see any woman in the towns, without the covering shroud called "Burka."

These practices underwent a change once the Taliban entered the picture post 9/11. They issued strict punitive strictures against the free movement of women without "Burka." In Mohmand Agency in FATA, the Taliban even prohibited women to draw water and to collect twigs or dry grass for their kitchen; instead the Taliban ordered the men to do so! Similarly, women were prohibited to work in schools or hospitals as teachers or nurses and doctors. It was mostly due to these strictures that forced the female to stay indoors and also explains the campaign of militants against girl's schools and colleges.

3. The Criminalization of the female

This research discovered that the Taliban injunctions regarding the appearance of women in open spaces forced them to become virtual prisoners within their own household. This is not the place to show why such an attitude is harmful for the development of the personality of a woman and how it retards economic growth as well as reduce household incomes; suffice it to say that such attitudes are regressive and thwart the growth of the female in more than one way. However, I believe that the Taliban have cleverly exploited women's exclusion by misusing her in another context.

The Taliban has reconstructed the Pukhtun women as a source of their support for creating a base through clever manipulation of media technology. Unknowingly the women thus became complicit in the anti-state and illegal Taliban movement which is proscribed under Pakistani law and thus criminalized herself! The process of criminalization follows a well defined path which has different phases and is found to be present in all those places where the Taliban have obtained supremacy as was or is the case in Waziristan, Bajaur, Mohmand, Swat and other places in KP.

The following is a description of the process. Once the Taliban enter a community they build support for their movement by criticizing the government for its failure to prevent crime and provide justice. Once a minimal level of support for this narrative is achieved, the Taliban begin a campaign against criminals and social deviates only for a short time. Simultaneously, they prohibit shops from dealing in DVDs. They also censure and outlaw cable TV and normal television viewing that is considered a sin. These alternate media sources are defined as corrupting

influences generated by the West to pollute the purity of their version of Islam, particularly in the case of women.

The campaign increases a notch when citizens are encouraged to smash TV sets. Those who refuse are threatened. Slowly, the fate of the woman is being defined when she cannot come out of her home and is also denied any contact with the external world since she can no longer view TV or watch DVDs. In the meanwhile the Taliban marginalize the effectiveness of police by killing them. Thus the ability of the state to regulate laws and to provide protection to the citizens disappears. Swat reached this state in early December 2009.

At this juncture the Taliban achieve supremacy in a defined physical space and install an illegal FM radio station which begins to broadcast religious educational programs. The woman who is devoid of any entertainment and is fearful of coming out is forced to become a devout listener to such broadcast as she has little else to do and slowly becomes a follower of the radio.

4. FM Radio as Social Transformer

An analysis of the content of the Swat FM, also called "Mullah FM" shows that its program content included a lot of material that may be classified as a personalized interpretation of Islam. Secondly, the content analysis evidently showed the ignorance of the broadcasters of the basic principles of Islam². Since the woman in Swat have poor religious education they are not able to distinguish between right and wrong and believe whatever was broadcast on the radio³.

The women were given to understand in these broadcasts that the Taliban would reestablish the Golden Age of Islam. They were encouraged to donate money and were also persuaded to pressurize their husbands and sons to join the militants in the rebellion against the state. Furthermore the Taliban encouraged women to make telephone calls to the radio station. Some women complained on telephone that Mullah Fazalullah and Shah Duran were themselves guilty of infringing the Islamic code when they spoke to unknown women⁴.

In a sense a woman with a radio became a captive to the constant haranguing over Mullah Radio. During a focus group discussion in Swat, some women respondents had become supporters of the Taliban when Mullah Fazalullah declared that it was forbidden for married women who lived in joint households to speak to their brother-in-laws! It provided many women an "Islamic" justification- a la Fazalullah to separate from their in-laws. It made the Taliban popular in some households and they were seen as a liberating influence by some women⁵.

Over a period of time as the Taliban of Swat became more entrenched and powerful they began prompting women via their radio to make donations to their cause. Many respondents who were interviewed reported that they gave their jewelry, money and in one case, a woman donated her car to the Taliban⁶. Some of the pronouncement over the FM radio asked women to convince their husbands to join their ranks; other broadcasts urged women to hit the military and police with stones when they came to their vicinity⁷.

An examination of the process highlighted above clearly shows the power of the FM radio not only as a platform for an outreach program of recreating identities but also as an instrument of mind-control. While the initial entry of the Taliban into the women's mind is made via religious imagery, the subsequent takeover of their judgment and the exclusion of ideas expressed through

competing TV or DVD media is blocked ensuring the complete take-over of the mind of the female.

How can one explain this phenomenon? One of the best comparison available is the brain washing techniques used by the North Koreans against prisoners of war, where attempts were made to obtain mind control over the captured prisoners. Lifton who studied the phenomenon in the late 1950's found that the takeover of mind followed a ten step process that began with an assault on the identity of a person and the creation of guilt and ended with the birth of a new personality⁸.

In the case of the women of Swat that initial attack is on her normal identity as a person living her life within the parameters of a relatively liberal Pukhtun cultural tradition. The attack by Taliban on the women is gender specific, and it slowly strips her of decency and she begins to think of herself as an evil entity – when this takes place her identity breaks down and she is enclosed within a cocoon of guilt – it allows the militants to transplant another identity favorable to them.

Her existence as an individual is thus destroyed when she is prohibited to come out of the house except with a male member of the family; her places of education in the school are burnt and she is not even permitted medical treatment in hospitals except under specific conditions. Such prohibitions lead the women to hate herself. She feels belittled.

At this stage her identity is replaced by a new one which is anchored in pseudo - religion of the Taliban. Already suffering the burden of guilt engendered by the Taliban the women develops a strong guilt complex. She tries to atone for it by making extravagant donations to the Taliban and by also convincing her husband to support the militants. In this way she hopes to regain support and favor with the Taliban. When she reaches this stage she has supplanted her previous identity by a new one exactly as Lifton found in the case of the Korean PoWs.

However while the female undergoes this trauma of identity change, unwittingly she also begins a journey towards criminality when her donations to an outlawed outfit technically makes her an accessory to a crime against the state! On another level, when she convinces her husband to help the militants, she descends further into the spiral of crime and builds a path for her own destruction!

5. Conclusion

Although Swat has been wrested back from the Taliban but their effect on the identity of the women still remains. The great paradox that emerges from this field research is that a human being who has been hardwired by nature to be the homemaker and its primary savior is forced by an identity change to become a family's weakest link like a fifth column assisting those very forces that would later execute and enslave her.

Another fearful portend for the future is that many female respondents who were interviewed for this article expressed a yearning for the return of the good old days of "Mullah Radio!" Apparently the government needs to re-examine some of its approaches for normalizing Swat. A robust communication strategy with psychological out-reach programs, specially focused on rehabilitating the female identity according to the relatively relaxed Pukhtun social customs is essential for

obtaining long term stability in the region and the rehabilitation of the mental health of the female in Swat.

Endnotes

¹ This research is the product of a joint UNHCR-RIPORT trauma management project in Swat called “Da Malgaro Kor”. The project goal is to provide assistance to all those who have suffered psychological trauma as a result of the conflict in Swat. The focus group and key informant interviews were conducted by researchers from the project. Their commendable efforts were instrumental in writing this research paper. The work by Ms. Moina Baig, RIPORT Lead Researcher in conducting the women FGDs is specially acknowledged.

² A total of five women FGDs were held in Swat. The important findings are contained in the Minutes of FGD held at Fazalabad, Union Council Kanju on 4th March 2010

³ (Ibid 2) For instance “Ya ayeuhal momineen,” was translated by the FM Swat as meaning the people of Kuzabanda.

⁴ (Ibid 2)

⁵ (Ibid 2)

⁶ (Ibid 2)

⁷ (Ibid 2)

⁸ Robert Jay Lifton, *Brain - Washing Techniques*, <http://history.howstuffworks.com/korean-war/korean-war.htm>, accessed on 2nd April, 2010