

# **A HORRIBLE TOOL OF COMMUNICATION IN SWAT**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Swat is a beautiful valley, some 100 miles from Islamabad, situated in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), formerly known as North Western Frontier Province of Pakistan. Due to its heavenly scenic beauty and resultant massive tourist attraction, both domestic and foreign, it was called the ‘Switzerland’ of Pakistan. The valley houses three districts with about 1.7 million, largely Muslim population, and majority with a liberal outlook. Over the last two decades or so, since a large part of the state’s economy depended on tourism – many of them foreigners and women - the inhabitants are not as conservative and extremist as against the common perception about the people of KPK both in and outside Pakistan. Against the common Pakistani literacy rate which is quite dismal – especially that of KPK – the Swat valley boasts of one of the highest literacy rates in Pakistan, and women education was laid emphasis on. Therefore, its secular outlook was, before it fell to the Taliban rule, more dominant than other parts of the region.

The Princely state of Swat came into being in 1917 which decided to accede to Pakistan during 1947 partition of India and Pakistan due to its Muslim majority status. It continued to enjoy its Princely state status until 1969 when it formally became an integral part of the state of Pakistan. It remained a peaceful and one of the most sought after tourist resorts due to two reasons. One, it possesses the most enchanting landscape with very mild weather during the summer and two, its geographical placement which serves as the main gateway to other famous tourist attractions in the north Western parts of Pakistan.

During the Afghan War in 1980’s, Swat served as one of the favourite bastions of the Mujahedeen. At that time majority of Pakistanis considered that the Mujahedeen were fighting a holy war in Afghanistan hence they received huge support in the region. Additionally, government was also supporting them with international backing; there was no conflict between the two. The vale served, like many other places in the region, as the bastion for Mujahedeen recruitment, training and then consequent launching into the war theatre in Afghanistan and even Indian held Kashmir, many argue.

During this period, the Mujahedeen enjoyed both domestic and international support, led by the US, in the form of money, training and weapons against the Russians. However, soon after the departure of the Russians in the nineties, the world and America turned away from them and they were left at their own to deal with their gruesome issues which were complex, diversified and confusing in the aftermath of a decade long war against the Russians. During the same days, in 1990<sup>1</sup>, Tehrik-e Nifaz-e Shariat-e Muhammadi (TNSM) (Movement for the

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<sup>1</sup> Khattak, D (2010) ‘The Battle for Pakistan: Militancy and Conflict in Swat Valley’ in, Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative Policy Paper, P 5.

implementation for the Sharia (law) of Muhammad) was initiated by Sufi Muhammad: an Afghan Jihad veteran and an active member of Jamat-e- Islami.

Later, when Taliban gained control over Afghanistan the TNSM was quick to show allegiance to them and reportedly Sufi Muhammad, who had fought alongside them, took an active part in the government making in Afghanistan. Inspired by the ‘success’ of the Taliban in forming and running the government in Afghanistan, he decided to give impetus to his movement. He announced that his TNSM will make efforts to employ the Sharia law first in NWFP with designs to spread it all over Pakistan, subsequently. It was an effort to run a parallel government system of justice and governance under his self styled interpretation of the Muhammadan Sharia. He was trying to emulate the primitive system of governance run by the Pious Caliphs right after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). In the meanwhile the Taliban government was ousted by the Allied forces in late 2001 soon after the 9/11 attacks in New York. It was on his return from Afghanistan in 2001, he was arrested on the charges of massive recruiting for Taliban, initiating public unrest and defying the government orders and system. His organisation TNSM was banned too in 2002.

After the detention of Sufi Muhammad the group declined and nearly subsided. However, after 2005 Earthquake, it emerged as a leading organisation in relief and rescue activities and won massive support of the valley residents. This time TNSM was led by Mullah Fazlullah - son in law of Sufi Muhammad. He was also nick named as ‘Mullah Radio’ as he used pirate FM radios a lot for the propagation of his thoughts.

In October 2007, the incident of Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) happened which proved to be watershed in the spread of extremism and massive increase in support for Taliban. It was also one of the leading contributing factors in the rise of suicide attacks in Pakistan. It was a mosque with an associated seminary where many male and female youth of the poor origins, largely from KPK and FATA, received religious education. They tried to enforce their version of Islamic Sharia in the capital with their batons and threats to the ‘wrong doers’. They were crushed by the Musharraf regime with heavy shells of artillery and it was largely reported in the local press that the operation killed some 200 young students, mostly girls. Weary of the backlash, Musharraf ordered an operation Rah-i- Haq I (the just path) in the valley.<sup>2</sup>

The operation Rah-i-Haq I never got momentum due to rise of activities of TNSM and over involvement of Musharraf in political matters as the lawyers movement was at its peak to restore the deposed Chief Justice of the Supreme court of Pakistan. These factors coupled with the tattering legal, judicial and economic system in Pakistan hastened the growth and popularity of TNSM in the whole region. Sufi Muhammad became their political and religious ideologue and they showed close allegiance with Tehrik -e- Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

During this time, it was reported that there were more than 100 illegal FM radio stations running in the region and many were working in Swat for continuous propagation of TNSM’s

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<sup>2</sup> Kumar, U (2009), ‘Swat: A Chronology Since 2006’, IPCS Special Report, 68, March 2009.

version of Islamic Sharia and how it should be implemented. By the end of 2007, TNSM led by Fazlullah had a substantial control over the valley. The military and paramilitary officials were attacked, abducted and ruthlessly killed. Over 70 courts were set up, in parallel with the existing legal system, to provide speedy justice to the masses- which was not available hitherto. Female education was banned and women had to lead their lives under strict restrictions and even duress. Many argue that was close to what the Taliban practised in Afghanistan during their tenure under Mullah Omer.

Mullah Fazlullah had a de facto rule over the three districts of the valley and vowed to extend its rule (in the name of Sharia) to the adjoining areas first and then to the rest of Pakistan. It was a challenging situation. The main focus of the TNSM 'government' was summarised by as under:

“The Taliban’s parallel government in the district includes the collection of ushr, the Islamic tax of one-tenth of agricultural produce; their court dispense speedy justice, from fines to lashes and beheadings.”<sup>3</sup>

The Taliban treated the civil and para- military officials as enemies and treated them harshly. They were kidnapped frequently and many of them later hanged or beheaded. There were regular incidents of bomb blasts of the government building, especially girls school, civil courts, police station and other important buildings. The tolerance level for the enemies was quite low. Many received the sentence of death even if they talked about the Taliban in private. It was ruthless rule.

In the meanwhile the government was changed in Islamabad. The military regime of Musharraf gave way to the popularly elected Pakistan People Party’s (PPP) led coalition government and the KPK province was governed by Awami National Party (ANP). The political government wanted to resolve the issue with political means. The operation was abandoned. The ideologue of TNSM was released in 2008 and with his prominent presence a dialogue was started with the Taliban and finally a peace agreement was reached in 2008. The government agreed to the demands of the Taliban and decided to introduce Sharia as desired by them.

The Taliban atrocities against the government officials continued unabated. They were still being kidnapped and killed. Some smaller groups too were emerging the neighbouring areas and were openly challenging the government authority with impunity. It looked as if anarchy had prevailed. Finally, therefore, with the approval of the civilian government in Islamabad the military launched a full offensive Operation rah-i-Rast (the right path) against the Taliban was launched in January 2009. The operation went on successfully but forth another problem of around 1.5 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Apparently, after the completion of military operation in 2009, everything has come under control of the civilian government, IDPs returned home and the legal rule returned.

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<sup>3</sup> Subramanian, N. <http://alaiwah.wordpress.com/2009/01/22/has-swat-fallen-to-the-taliban/> . As seen on 10-09-2010

## **THE RELIGIOUS OUTLOOK AND SHARIA?**

For about half a decade the ruthless rule of the Taliban continued in the swat region. It was a rule of fear where corporal punishment and body torture was a leading tool of governance. Severe punishments were given frequently even for minor crimes. The Taliban rule was run under the banner of TNSM. It gained impetus after the arrest of its founder leader Sufi Muhammad and the leadership fell to his son in law Mullah Fazlullah, whose real name was Fazle Hayat. He utilised illegal FM radio stations to give fiery speeches against the prevailing system of governance and advocated for the promulgation of Sharia laws to help eradicate social evils. He was a man with limited religious and traditional education. He was reported to have confessed that he was not a religious scholar in his inner circles. Still he utilised Islam and public emotions by exploiting emotional allegiance of the common man for his political benefit. Afzal Khan (2007) describes his personality as under :

“Born in 1975 to a simple farming family in Mam Dheri near Fizza Gha, Fazle Hayat changed his name in the 1990s to Fazlullah in order to bolster his credentials as an Islamic leader, even though he had failed to receive full credentials from any religious institution.”<sup>4</sup>

Many of his detractors alleged that he was involved in petty crimes, too. It must be understood an expert in Islamic Sharia – just like any other expert or scholar of a religion - one has to go through rigorous and lengthy training to understand its true meaning. It is a diverse and complex system of education which requires thorough and dedicated understanding. Only then one is able to lead others in the ways of Sharia. However, he just filled in the vacuum left by his father in law. The tattering justice system, widening economic disparities, disillusionment of the people from the aging and good for nothing political order only helped expedite the process.

This was the leader, now how about his followers. Many Swatis alleged that they were the bunch of thugs who joined together with a common cause of getting access to public money and power. Many of them were even criminals. Khattak (2010) cites an interview with a prominent citizen who describes the members of the organisation as under:

“Most of the Swatis who supported Fazlullah did so only morally, but some took up arms after being inspired by his FM radio sermons, and many of these recruits were disenchanting, poor, illiterate, and unemployed youth.”<sup>5</sup>

Shah Dauran, the deputy of Fazlullah and Muslim Kan – their spokes person were men of tainted and criminal past.<sup>6</sup> Malik Naveed Khan, Inspector General of Police KPK (formerly NWFP) said the following about TNSM followers:

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<sup>4</sup> Afzal Khan, “Revolt in Pakistan’s NWFP: A Profile of Maulana Fazlullah of Swat” Jamestown Terrorism Focus, November 20, 2007,

[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=4555](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=4555). As seen on 13-07-2010

<sup>5</sup> As quoted in Khattak, D (2010) ‘The Battle for Pakistan: Militancy and Conflict in Swat Valley’ in, Counterterrorism Strategy Initiative Policy Paper, P 5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. P 6.

“Many Taliban recruits were criminals who pursued their livelihood by joining the movement. Other joined to settle personal scores with opponents of the Swat Taliban. The Taliban welcomed the criminals to increase its power against the Pakistani security forces as well as some local khans, who had their own armed groups in Swat. The arrangement was mutually reinforcing.

“The Taliban needed support from the strong criminal gangs to terrorize people and raise money, while the criminals needed a cover to save their skins and continue their activities.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Body and Political Communication in Swat**

Mullah Fazlullah had a special liking for the media. Unlike anything in the past he chose FM radio station for the propagation of his thought and for a lot more things. Actually he was emulating the success of some of the other local Taliban leaders who were using illegal FM radios. But he had an unmatched success which inspired still others to follow. Only in 2006, as a matter of fact Pakistan Electronic Media Authority (PEMRA) shut down more than 60 illegal FM radio stations in the area.<sup>8</sup> Fazlullah or one of his deputies regularly gave sermons on the radio. The sermons had fiery speeches against the existing system, preaching the extremist brand of Islam, giving warning to their enemies, announcements of punishments, executions and pardons, etc.<sup>9</sup> No one could afford to miss any. If in doubt people were questioned about what he said, who was going to be beheaded and who was next?

Here are some of the salient features of their rule. They were dead against TV, music, dancing, painting, sculpture and every other form of art and considered them *haram*: sacrilegious. Listening to the sermons was a must. All music and CD shops were either forced shut down or burnt. The barbers were forced not to shave beards otherwise they face dire consequences. Women were not allowed to come out of their homes without their *Mehrams* (nearest relatives whom they cannot marry under religious injunctions) and that too fully covered. Girls schools were burnt and ironically, women were not even allowed to attend any male doctors in case of illness. Actually, the first signs of their strength was their drive against the anti polio campaign of the government functionaries. The government polio teams were either abducted or treated harshly and medical units burnt. The government officials bore the worst burnt of their anger. Their kidnappings, taking hostages, shootings, hangings, amputations, etc were quite frequent to happen.

The whole system rested on oppression, fear and its propagation. They had set up over 70 courts<sup>10</sup> headed by their own self styled judges who gave severe punishments after summary proceedings: most of them corporal. More than that, many of the punishments were over and above their own judicial system. They not only believed in the efficacy of the corporal punishments but also propagated them to wider audiences and for longer duration.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. P 6.

<sup>8</sup> ‘The Daily Times’ November 28, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> ‘The Daily Times’ September 4, 2007.

<sup>10</sup> “Taliban running parallel courts in Swat”, *The Daily Times*, January 11, 2009

The punishments awarded by the courts were usually given in public and at open panoramic places after due publicity. For this FM radio and the sermons were used. Apart from that the word of mouth in the markets, mosques and public meetings played its role. At some occasions, to gain an optimum communication effect, the microphone was placed before the victims' mouth so that his / her screams could be heard at distances and by those women who were inside the homes. The practice was perfect to inflict fear and send shivers down the spines of those who even thought to go against them. Public floggings, limbs amputations, shaving of heads and blackening of faces were regular punishments. There was a classic example of a seventeen years old girl charged of adultery flogged publically and no one was listening to her screams.<sup>11</sup>

As mentioned above, the government functionaries (civilian or military) were their worst victims. Add to this list: informers; spies; common citizens - who dared to speak against them even in private meetings; anti Taliban militia; and even religious elders who advocated a version of Islam different from. Hence, worst punishments were reserved for them. Such men when captured, either slaughtered or hanged at public places. News of beheading and hangings regularly appeared in local and national news papers.<sup>12</sup>

Again, for such punishments public places were chosen. According to Mukhtar Khan (2009):

“One of the busiest business squares in Mingora (Swat's largest town) was known as the Grain Chowk (square), but is now known as “Khooni Chowk” (the Bloody Square) because it has become routine to see dead bodies hanging from poles in that place.”<sup>13</sup>

Though it was not usual, women were no exception. The situation in ‘Khooni Chowk’ was described by Subramanian (2010) as under:

“A woman's body hung there a few days ago. Her name was Shabana and she was a well-known dancer who worked in the local theatre industry. Women defying the order not to stir out have been punished with a hair-cut in public.”<sup>14</sup>

For the purpose of slaughtering, they had specialist in Sher Mohammad Qasab (butcher in Urdu). “He is alleged to have run an organized slaughter chamber in Charbagh where he executed several innocent security officials and other opponents of the Taliban.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1gKY7CX5ew>. As seen on 10-09-2010.

<sup>12</sup> “More beheadings in Swat”, *The Daily Times*, October 28, 2007

<sup>13</sup> Khan, M (2009), ‘The Return of Sharia Law to Pakistan's Swat Region’, Jamestown Terrorism Monitor, March 3, 2009, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=34576&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=7&cHash=081b812552](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=34576&tx_ttnews[backPid]=7&cHash=081b812552). As seen on 13-08-2010.

<sup>14</sup> Taj, F (2008), ‘Hanging a Dead Pir’, December 27, 2008 [http://www.valleyswat.net/articles/hanging\\_dead\\_pir.html](http://www.valleyswat.net/articles/hanging_dead_pir.html). As seen on 30-08-2010

<sup>15</sup> Khan, M (2009), ‘The Return of Sharia Law to Pakistan's Swat Region’, Jamestown Terrorism Monitor, March 3, 2009, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=34576&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=7&cHash=081b812552](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=34576&tx_ttnews[backPid]=7&cHash=081b812552). As seen on 13-08-2010.

He was notorious for the slaughter of the ‘enemies’ and those who defied. His activities were summarised by Mukhtar Khan, which is fearsome:

“Qasab was a symbol of terror, having slaughtered police and military officials and all other opponents, including “spies” and members of anti-Taliban tribal militias. He did this publicly and sometimes on videotape to terrorize the rest of the people. He used to make piles of heads in the notorious Green Chowk (later known as Khooni Chowk, or Bloody Square) in the Swat capital of Mingora, once famous for tourism and scenic spots. The mutilated and decapitated bodies were often left hanging on poles with threatening notes.”<sup>16</sup>

The Taliban did not stop at this. The treatment of those who disagreed to them ideologically was even more horrible. They gave them the treatment similar to what was there for Pakistan’s para military officials. It took the worst turn against Pir Samiullah’s who was a potential threat for them in the area. He was a resident of ‘Matta’ and had ideological differences with Taliban. He was alleged to have relations with Pakistan Army which supported him to raise a militia against the Taliban to help diffuse the latter’s control in the region. In an astonishing display of ruthless cruelty, after his death, the Pir’s body was exhumed from his grave and strung at a busy square.<sup>17</sup> They kept it hanging there for more than three days. It is difficult to find a parallel in the recent history except for the treatment of Najibullah, the former Afghan President, whose body met the same fate at the hands of the Taliban. It was clear signal to their enemies for the treatment they should expect.

Conclusion

As the excesses of the extremist groups slowly became evident, highlighted recently by the much publicised videos depicting the flogging of a woman and beheading of captured security personnel, public sentiment turned against the Taliban.<sup>18</sup>

## About the Author

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<sup>16</sup> Khan, M. (2009) Taliban Commander Known as “the Butcher” Dies After Arrest in Swat Valley

Publication: Terrorism Monitor Volume: 7 Issue: 29, September 25, 2009.

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<sup>17</sup> Subramanian, N. <http://alaiwah.wordpress.com/2009/01/22/has-swat-fallen-to-the-taliban/>. As seen on 10-09-2010

<sup>18</sup> Jetly, R (2009) Pakistan’s Taliban Crisis – Savaging or Salvaging the State? ISAS Brief no 114, July 2, 2009, P 1.

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