

Friends Of The Taliban

Support for the Taliban in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province remains strong despite Islamabad's efforts to cut it back

Far Eastern Economic Review- 04/09/2003

By Ahmed Rashid/Peshawar and Gulanaï

at the end of August, the Taliban launched their heaviest counterattack since being knocked from power in Afghanistan two years ago at the hands of a United States-led military coalition. That the attack came across the southern Afghan border from Pakistan was no surprise. But the breadth of support from inside a country whose leader has been so vocal in his support for the Taliban's enemy, the U.S., is startling.

Pakistan's pro-Taliban faction includes the provincial government in the North-West Frontier Province, which is a coalition of six Islamic parties called the *Mattahida Majlis-e-Amal*. Militants allied with this coalition are providing sanctuary and clandestine support for the Taliban. They are driven by their objection to the presence of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan, by their dislike for U.S.-backed Afghan President Hamid Karzai, and especially by their common heritage-both they and the Taliban are from the Pashtun ethnic group. The growing militancy among the Taliban and their Pashtun supporters could destabilize the entire region.

It is the anti-American hatred that most binds the Pashtuns. "Anyone fighting the Americans is our friend, and we will try and help the Taliban as much as we can-we are all Pashtuns," says Maulvi Israrul Haq, a member of the North-West Frontier Province assembly.

Such views are found within the army, too. On August 31, army spokesman Maj.-Gen. Shaukat Saulat said that up to four mid-level officers had been arrested for suspected links to Pakistani extremist Islamic groups. The same day, *The Daily Times* newspaper said that up to 16 officers had been arrested, some after returning from Afghanistan where they were fighting with the Taliban.

A senior retired military officer said that the arrests may be the result of information from Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the third-most-senior Al Qaeda leader who was captured in Rawalpindi in March 2003. Mohammed reportedly has provided U.S. intelligence with a treasure trove of information.

The arrests come amid increasing concern that Islamic extremism is rising among the army's officer corps right beneath the nose of Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf, who is also army chief. Musharraf's support for the U.S. is not popular. In the past, Pakistan's army backed extremist Islamic causes such as the Taliban. But since the September 11, 2001, attacks in the U.S., Musharraf has insisted that Islamic fundamentalism is gone from the army.

The Pakistan military's attempts to contain the Taliban have been hampered by the ruling provincial government in the North-West Frontier Province. The Islamic coalition came to power after winning a majority in last October's general elections. Its two largest component parties both have links to the Taliban and other Afghan extremist groups.

One of these Islamic parties, the *Jamiat-e-Ullemah Islam*, supported the Taliban with tens of thousands of Pakistani fighters in the 1990s. Politicians in the provincial capital of Peshawar say that *Jamiat-e-Ullemah Islam* is now directly supporting the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, and many Taliban leaders and their families have been given sanctuary in the group's madrassas, or Islamic schools.

The other major Islamic partner of the coalition is *Jamaat-e-Islami*, which is considered to be the best-organized Islamic party across Pakistan. The *Jamaat-e-Islami* backs its former Afghan ally, warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who has himself supported the Taliban. Leaders from both Islamic parties claim that the Taliban are also receiving support from Pakistan's *Interservices Intelligence*, which the army denies.

The coalition's domestic agenda The domestic agenda of the Islamic coalition in the North-West Frontier

Province has been easier for the central government to thwart than its support for the Taliban. In June the coalition passed a bill that enshrined sharia, or Islamic law, in order to segregate education by students' sex and transform the province's legal and social systems in keeping with Islamic orthodoxy. The coalition then pledged to set up an Islamic vigilante force and a Department for Vice and Virtue, copying the former Taliban model in Afghanistan.

Under mounting U.S. pressure, Musharraf moved to block the coalition's moves by delaying funds from Islamabad bound for Peshawar and by replacing sympathetic senior police officers and bureaucrats. Finally, Musharraf threatened to dissolve the North-West Frontier Province assembly if the Islamic coalition pursued its more radical legislation. "The [coalition's] political agenda has been slowed down by the central government, but it is expanding as a social and cultural phenomena because of the anti-Americanism in the province," says Fazlur Rahim Marwat, a professor at the Pakistan Study Centre at Peshawar University.

At the same time, however, secular Pashtun nationalist forces may be making a comeback in the region. Led by the Awami National Party, these forces are gaining popularity with the argument that the Islamic coalition, run largely by mullahs, has not delivered economic development. Unemployment is over 40%. "The [coalition] cannot deliver jobs and many people now resent how it is exploiting Islam," says Begun Nasim Wali Khan, the provincial chief of the Awami National Party. "Our slogan is: 'Hands off Afghanistan'," says han, whose group strongly opposes Pakistani interference in Afghanistan and backs the U.S.-Karzai efforts.

Ambivalence towards the coalition hasn't translated into less Pashtun support for the Taliban. That might require the creation of a modern, moderate Pashtun leadership as a realistic alternative, which is something neither Karzai nor Musharraf have so far been able to do. Nor are the two leaders putting aside past differences to use the money that the U.S. and international agencies are providing to both countries to map out a common development programme for Pashtuns on both sides of the border. Until that happens, the mullahs are in control.