

## How Peshawar massacre changed Pakistan

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The year 2015 has been a make-or-break for Pakistan - and no question has been bigger than whether to talk to militants or crush them.

The determining event that led to a dramatic change of policy by both the military and the civilian government was the 16 December 2014 attack on an army public school in Peshawar that left 150 people dead - mostly children and female teachers.

The public and the army demanded retribution and emergency measures were taken after the Pakistani Taliban based in Afghanistan claimed to have carried out the attack. Here are some of the far-reaching consequences for the country and ways in which it has changed.

### National Action Plan

An all-parties conference held by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in Peshawar swiftly agreed to a 20-point National Action Plan that would combat and eliminate the threat of terrorism.

Image copyright AFP Image caption Pakistan still feels the effects of the conflict with militants - but not nearly as much. Here mourners attend funerals for those killed in an anti-militant drone strike

The army had in June 2014 already launched a military campaign to clear North Waziristan of the Taliban. It has since stepped up its offensive, targeting other areas such as the Khyber and Kurram tribal agencies in the border regions. The military aspects of this plan have been implemented by the army in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province in particular.

But there has been a chronic lack of will shown by the civilian government over implementing the social and political aspects of the plan - in areas such as madrassa reform, containing the spread of extremism through social media, improving education and, most important of all, building the promised National Counter Terrorism Authority (Nacta) that was established in 2009, but has remained dormant ever since.

The Nacta Act passed by parliament in 2013 would have brought all intelligence agencies onto a common platform but was never implemented. There is clearly a lack of government capacity in Islamabad to take on all the onerous parts of the plan.

Instead of encouraging and helping civilians to build capacity, the army's response has been to take on more and more tasks itself - which is becoming untenable as it is over-stretched.

### Militant attacks down

Major militant attacks have been reduced from dozens every month in 2014 to no more than one or two a month this year. Clearly, the army offensive in the tribal regions which resulted in [insurgents](#) being killed or escaping to Afghanistan has had a major positive effect. In Karachi the clean-up of militants, political party-based militias and extortion gangs has also been positive with citizens reporting the first peace in the city for many years.

Sectarian attacks on the minority Shia population were also reduced after the 29 July "encounter" killing by the police in Punjab of Malik Ishaq, the leader of the anti-Shia [Lashkar-e-Jhangvi group](#) and his two sons. Ishaq was on a US list of global "terrorists". However, minorities such as Shias, Ahmedis and non-Muslims like Christians continue to be attacked with impunity.

### Army offensive

Nevertheless, the army offensives have so far been selective - aiming at Balochistan where separatist rebels have been attacked and also a political peace offensive launched; KP province and tribal regions where the Pakistani Taliban have been targeted; and Karachi where a variety of ideological groups and mafias have been targeted. Image copyright Reuters Image caption The army needs to help civilians build capacity while becoming more transparent and inclusive in foreign policy and in national security decisions However, apart from the killing of Malik Ishaq, groups in Punjab have been left untouched. These include the largest extremist group in the country, [Lashkar-e-Taiba](#), which has gone through several name changes and now ostensibly carries out charity work.

Up to 70 groups are active in Punjab - many of them directed at India and trying to wrest the Indian part of Kashmir from Delhi's control.

The US and Western nations have expressed growing concern that with the large number of small tactical nuclear weapons now being deployed in Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, the Punjab-based groups which have close links to the military could get their hands on them.

The army has reassured the Americans that all security measures are being taken. It has also loudly hinted that a clean-up in Punjab will take place once other areas are settled.

### Executions

The European Union and Pakistani human rights groups have been deeply perturbed [at the number of executions in Pakistan](#). After the Peshawar school attack the seven-year moratorium on executions was lifted and this year more than 300 people have received capital punishment. The vast majority were those not convicted of terrorism.

Image copyright Reuters Image caption Pakistan lifted a seven-year moratorium on executions in response to Peshawar massacre.

Pakistan has over 6,000 prisoners awaiting execution - one of the largest number of inmates on death row in the world. The government's failure to address the long-running failures in an over-crowded legal system has created a dependency on death sentences, often with poor evidence or none at all. Anti-terrorism military courts were established in 2015, but they remain highly controversial. A better path would be for the government to improve the legal system and modernise the police. However with some 20-25% of the national budget going on the military, there is little room for more for the police.

## **Military-civilian tensions**

Civilian-military tensions remain, but at times are lessened largely due to the government stepping back and accepting demands by the army.

The government has come under criticism for not standing up to the army, but also praised for not seeking a confrontation with it.

However this is a dangerous situation for the future as the army extends its writ not only in counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism, but also in the legal system, monitoring and controlling the media, influencing the appointment of key officials as well as determining the country's foreign and security policy.

## **Government incapacity**

So the year 2016 also promises to be a make-or-break year. The civilian government has to address its incapacity in key areas of governance. For example some 1.2 million internally displaced persons still have to be rehabilitated in KP province and the tribal regions. This task should be undertaken a civilian one, but the army has already started the process.

An improvement of the legal and police system and the need to build up Nacta by civilians are all of the utmost importance. The army needs to help civilians build capacity while becoming more transparent and inclusive in foreign policy and in national security decisions it takes.

The civilian side needs to be more assertive in taking decisions and implementing promises. Pakistan is still not out of the woods as far as terrorism is concerned and the new year will demonstrate whether the leadership has the will to improve the situation.