



SOUTH ASIA PARTNERSHIP  
SOCIÉTÉ ASIATIQUE DES PARTENAIRES  
CANADA

## **Pakistan: New Risks, Challenges and Opportunities**

**Report on the Presentation by South Asia Partnership-Pakistan**

**National Press Club, Ottawa**

**21 November 2002**

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It has been yet another turbulent year for Pakistan. The population has been subjected to the fallout from one war and brought to the brink of another; they have been given the trappings of democracy, but the power to run the country is still firmly in the hands of one man; and while the majority of citizens remain mired in a basic daily struggle to survive, two antithetical forces are competing for their loyalty, one promising them a favoured position in the deep pockets of the West, the other promising them a place in heaven; and, all the while, civil society has been struggling to help the people achieve a measure of control over their own lives in the face of these tumultuous changes.

The recent elections in the country appeared from the outside world to offer a ray of hope for such empowerment of the citizenry. **Mr. Mohammed Tahseen, Executive Director of South Asia Partnership-Pakistan**, came to the National Press Club in Ottawa to talk about the new risks, challenges and opportunities facing civil society in Pakistan.

The risks, from the view of grassroots activists in Pakistan, are the same; it is only their intensity and order, which have changed since the polls, with new characters in place as the main actors. What was at stake is not merely a one-day right to vote; it is freedom from being subjected to human rights abuses, the right to participate in decisions affecting one's own life, the assurance that violations of these rights will be stopped. Having become more exposed to the outside world in the past year, this is what real democracy is coming to mean to most Pakistanis today.

The new forces in the Pakistani Parliament after the October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2002 provincial and national elections do not give much hope for the growth of real democracy. The 342-member National Assembly had been suspended since the 1999 coup, which brought General Pervez Musharraf to power, and when it reconvened after the elections, many of the familiar faces were missing. A law passed by General Musharraf prohibiting people with criminal convictions from running for office resulted in the exclusion of former

Prime Ministers Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto (the latter's party, the Pakistan People's Party nonetheless captured the popular vote). Their void was filled in large part by an alliance of religious parties, the *Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal* (MMA), who have 66 representatives in the house. This grouping of six far-right parties, which form the main opposition, may be united in their desire to temper the power wielded by the President and the military, but they fail to agree on many other things. Although the MMA claims to have resonated with the anti-American and anti-multinational sentiments prevailing among the populace, the party lacks substantive policy alternatives. Without an effective opposition, it will thus be Musharraf who defines the content of economic and political questions.

The greatest challenge confronting democracy and civil society arising from the elections is the entrenchment of the military in the nation's political institutions. Although the MMA and the PPP together obtained the highest number of votes running on an anti-Musharraf agenda, and thus in effect received a mandate from the people to remove the military from governance over the country, the Government will not be willing to go against the generals who created it. Besides being able to implement their policies by proxy, the military has another incentive for hanging on to power: the numbers of personnel in the armed forces are very high now, and so the pensions, benefits, employment of support staff and spin-off services which result from that population have a high economic value. Up to 40% of Pakistan's economy is considered tied to the military economic machine. Furthermore, there seems to be no prospects in the immediate future for separating the influence of the military over the elected representatives: General Musharraf has pledged to remain Chief of Army Staff while serving as President.

Involvement in the politics of the country has not been on the part of the military only: external forces have their own reasons for taking an interest in who governs Pakistan. The American Ambassador and the US State Department were openly declaring their disapproval of the possibility of a representative of the MMA taking the post of Prime Minister. And Indian politicians were having meetings with potential Prime Ministerial candidates during the campaigning period.

A final challenge to civil society paradoxically emanates from the very parties that were elected to Parliament to counter the military and foreign interests. Although they were supposed to represent the will of the people, the three opposition parties, particularly the MMA, are actually inimical to the initiatives and new directions taking place at the civil society level: they are vehemently opposed to the participation of the poor, of women, of farmers, of minorities and of NGOs in political structures; they have labelled civil society organizations as agents of Western imperialism; and they are actively trying to impede grassroots activism in the country.

It is ironic that such fundamentalist groups are today considered to be a threat to the current regime: it was the abdication of the traditional developmental role by the state

that created the space, which allowed popular support for religious extremism to grow in civil society. This radicalisation of Pakistani civil society was started by General Zia ul-Haq in his efforts to gain legitimacy, and has been continued, including by Musharraf, for national security reasons. Now, in the post-September 11 crackdowns to restore the government's control over Pakistani society, all civil society organizations are being viewed with the same suspicion.

However, the greatest hope for the democracy movement in Pakistan also lies in the new Parliament. There are about 73 women sitting in the new assembly, and some of them representing the MMA. Even though many of those female Parliamentarians benefited from the re-introduction of reserved seats for women and were voted in on the strength of being the kith and kin of MMA leaders, they are, in the experience of Tahseen and other grassroots activists, open-minded and progressive individuals.

A shift in traditional loyalties is also cause for optimism. When the military took it upon themselves to enforce the Tenancy Act and brutally deprive farmers, who had been tilling their land for over one hundred years, of their property rights, it caused a large majority of Punjabis to say no to the military for the first time. Until recently, the military's strength came from the Punjab.

A seismic gap in the policies of the two main opposition parties also opens a window of opportunity for democratic exercise in the National Assembly; their radical agendas have created a space for individual members on middle ground to oppose the government at the legislative level.

Opportunities to bring peace to the region have also emerged from the poll results. While Musharraf has largely adhered to a single-issue agenda, that is, the dispute with India, the pro-military party that won the highest number of seats in Parliament has stated that it is open to a peaceful solution of the conflict with the nuclear neighbour. In addition, the peace movement and anti-nuclear groups in both India and Pakistan are linking their causes more than ever; non-governmental coalitions advocating against the proliferation of small arms and the use of land mines are lending support to calls by the nuclear abolitionists for government agendas to give greater attention to human security.

Short of an unlikely drastic change in Pakistan's foreign policy or of a major discontinuation of economic programmes, human rights activists like Tahseen do not foresee that the new government, nor assemblies in the near future, will produce an agenda that accurately reflects the concerns of the people. In the meanwhile, the major task of the non-governmental organizations will be to strengthen the progress that civil society, including media, trade unions, workers and tenant farmers, has made in the past years.

The struggle to strengthen civil society in Pakistan has had many failures and a few successes in the past year, according to a recently released report by Amnesty

International on the state of human rights in the country. Political detentions, torture, custodial killings, violence against women and minorities, harassment of journalists, juvenile detentions and ill treatment of prisoners continue. Amnesty is able to collect data on these practices largely due to the perseverance of local, community-based NGOs (like the partners of SAP), which work on these individual issues. While these organizations have done their part to raise awareness about social ills and about the rights of the individual, they cannot enforce the law, nor provide any relief to its victims. Many forms of human rights abuse and violence, particularly against women, are due to deeply-rooted tribal and feudal customs that have no place in civil society.

It is therefore important that the government assert itself by removing discriminatory legislation and enabling the recommendations of NGOs to reach the relevant authorities for timely and appropriate action. Some positive development have occurred, such as an order to end torture by the police in Sindh and the exercise of judicial independence by the Supreme Court in setting aside lower court rulings for reason of bias. The ongoing work of activists that has produced such successes, together with a timely use of some of the opportunities that have arisen from the elections, gives cause for optimism; there is a lot of light at the end of the tunnel, but the tunnel is long.

South Asia Partnership-Pakistan has been playing a part in lighting that tunnel for over 12 years, as outlined by **Mr. Irfan Mufti, Program Manager** at the organization. It has provided capacity-building to community-based organizations, supported the actions of civil society movements, strengthened its own institutional development and promoted linkages and partnership with other domestic civil society actors and with regional and foreign development partners. Their dedication to training has resulted in the sophistication of many grassroots groups, increasing their analytical, management and media skills and improving the quality of the services they provide to their constituents.

Women, labourers, farmers and local elected representatives have been the particular focus of this support. Programs for small farmers, who comprise 65% of the population, have given much emphasis to sustainable agricultural practices and capacity-building for conflict resolution, communal harmony, facilitating regular debate and dialogue, and accessing government services when available. Through the Farmers' Development Program, almost 200 farmers' groups or associations have been formed; it is notable that women farmers are also very active in these groups. The Gender Program has focused on developing research and analysis skills on domestic violence and the commercial sexual exploitation of women.

The results of these initiatives have been significant:

- I. Human rights networks and coalitions are now contributing to policy debates in the country. Over 350 local councillors are trained in effective lobbying techniques and ensuring that the concerns of their rural or disadvantaged constituents are being heard in Islamabad.

- II. At the local level, partnerships with local governments are ensuring that councillors, community-based organizations and citizens are working together to put local concerns on local council agendas. This work has the dual purpose of enhancing the individual citizen's role in local governance structures, and in developing a culture of accountability in these elected bodies.
- III. Matters that have long been taboo or that have been dismissed as subjects of debate in Pakistani society as a whole are now receiving intense focus, such as women's rights and peace. The latter has especially benefited from SAP's work to promote linkages with similar issue groups in other countries, particularly with the anti-nuclear movement in neighbouring India. Much effort is being put into the building of a South Asian regional dialogue on Small Arms and Light Weapons, a problem that has been a particular plague to human security in all five countries of the subcontinent.
- IV. Foreign partnerships are also growing: about 15 Canadian civil society organizations, including labour federations, peace groups and human rights associations who are supporting citizens' movement in Pakistan.

Just as the social ills that are the focus of human rights groups in Pakistan persist, there remain challenges to training people to overcome these obstacles: while there is increasing demand, the size of the programs remains limited by financial and personnel resources. Such limitations also highlight the need to institutionalize international partnerships.

In addition to such traditional obstacles, there is the emerging challenge of requiring new training curricula to meet the nascent political, economic and social conditions that have arisen in the country since the military coup and those that will emerge from the renewed, but limited, democratic process. Included in those future challenges will be sustaining the partnerships with community-based organizations and transferring ownership of current programs to them for the long-term.

And finally, there are the challenges that are unique to Muslim societies in the post-September 11 worlds. Its experience in understanding and responding to problems at the community-level make organizations like SAP-Pakistan well placed to address the struggles that civil society now faces in every country with an Islamic population. There is a need for NGOs (especially those that deal with women's rights or democracy) and the media, which may be perceived as being solely products of the West, to indigenise them.

Civil society also needs to wean itself off dependence on governments, particularly in countries where military rule or dictatorships taint the credibility of the relationship in the eyes of the masses suffering under such regimes. Building bridges between different grassroots causes is also imperative for the survival of those movements that are at odds with the religious leadership.

Finally, international partnerships, either with foreign associations or even with Pakistani expatriates abroad, will help strengthen struggling civil society groups at home and even expand the range of issues traditionally identified with Muslim concern. The latter linkages also allow indigenous organizations to raise awareness among their international partners that civil society is not incompatible with Islamic values and to highlight Koranic teachings that support human rights and equality. The vast range of programs and initiatives as outlined in the presentation by Mufti affirms the ability of SAP-Pakistan to rise to these challenges.

On the whole, the picture painted by the voices of civil society as represented by Tahseen and Mufti offer some hope for the growth of democracy and human rights for all in Pakistan. Even though little has changed since the elections in October 2002 and old entities retain a firm grip on power, the events and circumstances of the year following September 11, in combination with the perseverance of civil society entities in the country, like SAP-Pakistan, will ensure the inevitability of change.

The risks may be the same in nature if not appearance and the challenges may be perennial, but the opportunities that recent events and persistent dreams have attracted are unique.