



## The Fragile Regions of South Asia Why States Fail in Parts?

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There is a plethora of literature gathering in recent years on why states fail. Primarily, using the states of Africa as case studies, these studies provide an excellent account of state failure. As part of this exercise, there has also been a focus on weak and fragile states that are not necessarily in the 'failed' states category, but have the potential to fail.

Where does South Asia fit into this failed, failing, fragile and weak states pantheon? Do they come under these categories? Or, should there be some other yardstick to measure the nature of failure, fragility, and weakness of the State in South Asia?

### I "STATE" IN SOUTH ASIA

#### UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF FAILURE, FRAGILITY AND WEAKNESS

A clear distinction must be made between the terms/phrases like failing, failed, weak and fragile states, to avoid their being used synonymously. The purpose of this essay, though, is not to highlight the differences, but to caution that, in the South Asian context, these terms cannot be used interchangeably. Second, there is a huge difference, between the State in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa; the indicators of failure and fragility cannot be measured in the same manner, using similar indicators. Political instability, the nature of civil war and the ability of the State to bounce back in South Asia are totally different in South Asia. Third, the history and culture of these nations (not necessarily the nation-state) should be taken into consideration while measuring fragility and weakness in terms of leading to failure.

Theories and available statistics/surveys such as the annual Failed States Index (FSI) prepared by the US Fund for Peace do not explain why states like Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal, despite being in the failing/failed states category for a long time, actually have not failed. Pakistan is a classic case in

this context; in the last six decades of its existence, there have been numerous instances when the State has faced tremendous pressure. The State was under different systems of governance, faced numerous insurgencies, witnessed a major break up in 1971, got involved in four major military confrontations with India and funded several sub-conventional wars, actively took part in a jihad in neighbouring Afghanistan, resulting in a huge blowback. It is today under serious onslaught by radical groups, especially the Taliban. The only time it failed was in 1971, that too with external involvement. In what constitutes Pakistan, referred to as West Pakistan till 1971, the State has continuously been 'under crisis or at the crossroads' in the last six decades, yet it has not failed. What has sustained the State in Pakistan?

On the other hand, India, despite being in a better ranking in the Failed States Index (FSI), and never having felt seriously threatened at the national level, possesses regions – Northeast India, J&K, and increasingly, Central/East India (the so-called Red Corridor) that have been facing serious problems relating to governance and violence. Today, according to the Union government's own admission the threat from left wing extremists is a major challenge to the security of the State. If the same twelve yardsticks used to measure State failure in the FSI are applied to these affected parts of India, one could conclude that defined parts of India are in failure.

What sustains Pakistan, from being a failed State, despite ranking high on the indicators used to measure failure? And what makes India seem a better governed state, despite having large areas under severe pressure? Perhaps, South Asia need to analyse the entire failing/fragile state discourse from a different angle, since the State in South Asia cannot be bracketed with those in Sub-Saharan Africa or Middle Eastern/West Asian states. The State in South Asia does face problems of failure in cycles and in parts, but they seldom fail as a collective whole.

## II

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#### FAILURE/FRAGILITY IN PARTS

An earlier essay on the failed/failing states "Failure or Functional Anarchy: Failing States in South Asia," (*IPCS Issue Brief 100, April 2009*) addressed the question of state failure in parts. Despite numerous sub regions, facing serious problems of governance and crisis, the State at the macro-level does function. Pakistan, is a perfect example of this phenomenon. There are regions, for example FATA, Karachi within f Sindh, parts of Balochistan under the control of Bugti and Marri tribes – that face serious problems of governance. The presence of armed non-State actors and overarching violence exacerbates threats to human security in these areas, but the rest of Pakistan function relatively smoothly.

On the other hand, in India, while the whole State functions with relative normalcy, and democratic governance is the norm, there are regions/parts of India, where a serious governance crisis and violence is apparent. There are regions, where the disappearance of governance has become a major issue. Despite periodic elections here, one cannot claim that democratic norms exist in these regions/parts.

This is why "state failure in parts," or "fragile regions" within a state, becomes a useful tool of analysis.

#### Ungovernable vs Ungoverned Spaces

Scholars and administrators have started highlighting what is referred to as "Ungovernable spaces". There are regions in South Asia which have become ungovernable due to various reasons. In most cases in those ungovernable regions, there was/is a presence of strong armed non-state actors questioning the writ of the state. In some cases, these non-State actors have succeeded in establishing their own writ. FATA, Swat, parts of Balochistan, parts of Chattisgarh, Assam, Nagaland and J&K and, until recently, the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka, and several districts of Nepal that came under Maoist influence – all these regions have witnessed the presence of strong armed non-state actor(s),

*Why are these regions fragile? And what makes the whole function, despite its failure in parts? In other words, how does the fragility in one region/part not affect the others?*

using violence to undermine the State's writ and imposing their own. Hence these spaces have become ungovernable due to the authority of the State being supplanted by non-State actors using violent means.

The local Taliban in Swat, during 2007-09, wanted to uproot the presence of the State from educational institutions, formal and informal legal structures. The Taliban, led by Fazlullah, spearheaded a systematic campaign to render the State's administration inefficient and ineffective. They forced the State to enter negotiations with the Taliban to establish their version of justice, and convert their de jure writ into a de facto one. Civil society was threatened with dire consequences if they failed to follow their diktats. From banning music to growing beards, the Taliban enforced a moral code; though this process was called Islamisation, what the Taliban effectively achieved was to impose their own code to erode the authority of the State.

In FATA, the TTP is pursuing a similar policy to impose its own writ – by fighting against the State militarily, and issuing fatwas against the local civil/tribal society. Since 2004, there has been a bloody war between the State and various factions of the Taliban in North and South Waziristan, Bajaur and Mohamand agencies. Whatever may be the motivations underlying this war, the primary objective of the non-State actors is to impose their writ to erode that of Pakistani state. Besides, the Taliban groups are also engaged in imposing their own brand of Islam and code of social conduct in opposition to the Pashtunwali (the tribal code of Pashtuns). The Pashtun society has always been proud of its tribal code, which is centuries old, and predates the birth of Islam. The Pashtunwali is essentially secular and tribal in character. The Taliban, under their version of Islam, has attacked this code, primarily to establish their own writ over tribal society. hat used to be a jirga based social structure, functioning under the leadership of secular tribal elders, is now increasingly becoming a shariah based religious community, under the leadership of a few young bearded religious leaders. Today, in North and South Waziristan, anyone who needs to visit these regions, needs the prior permission of the local Taliban commanders, who unofficially control these areas.

In Sri Lanka, until 2009, the northern and eastern regions were effectively under the control of the LTTE, led by Prabhakaran. The LTTE governed these regions as a separate State, with the Sri Lankan government having absolutely no control or influence here. Neither the Sri Lankan Army nor the political leadership could enter these regions without the explicit permission of the LTTE. Even the members of international community – from media to NGOs, had to secure special permission from the LTTE to visit

these regions, These regions, from the late 1980s till mid 2009, were in fact a State within the State. They are clear examples of “Ungovernable” regions, where, even if the State wished to impose its writ, could not do so, as it faced a formidable military challenge. The State in these regions was, in truth, non-existent and had completely failed.

There are other regions – which could be classified as “ungoverned”, where the State does not exist, due to design, but by default. They are ungoverned regions, purely because of the State’s ineffectiveness, rather than its basic inability to govern. The State, due to its attention being focused elsewhere, or its neglecting its responsibilities, has completely ignored parts of its own territory. This, in turn, has provided space for non-State actors to emerge as the only functioning authority in these regions.

In India, the State does not exist in parts of Chattisgarh and Jharkhand, especially their interior forest/mountain areas. These are mostly “ungoverned”, but are not “ungovernable” regions. While, there is a substantial presence of Naxalites in most of these districts, there are still no “liberated” zones, or areas where the State needs to get permission from the non-State actors to enter. Despite the presence of Naxalites, the State could reach all parts of all electoral constituencies during the 2004 and 2008 elections, establish polling booths and organise elections, with hardly any violence. These regions are not free and are not fully governed, like many other parts of Chattisgarh, but they are not ungovernable. The State has not failed, it is inefficient and provides an epitome of mis-governance.

If the State wants, it can reach any of its part in the “ungoverned” category, whereas in “ungovernable” category, even if the State wants, it may not be able to. Whether ungovernable or ungoverned, there are serious problems of governance in both these types of regions. But the more important questions needing to be addressed is : What makes the whole function, despite its failure in parts? Can the rot be stemmed, and can it be quarantined?.

### III

#### SEARCH FOR A ‘FRAGILITY THRESHOLD’

#### THE FUNCTIONAL WHOLE VS DYSFUNCTIONAL PARTS

As mentioned earlier, in South Asia, the problem of failure/fragility/weakness may not be relevant for the whole State, but is important for its parts/regions. What makes the whole function, when there are serious problems in its parts? Or, what makes the parts fail, while the whole is relatively healthy? And is there a fragility threshold – in the sense that the whole could function up to a certain level, despite

*What makes the whole function, when there are serious problems in its parts? Or, what makes the parts fail, while the whole is relatively healthy? And is there a fragility threshold?*

the failure of its parts?

In Pakistan’s case, the problem that the international community faces is due to its failure to understand these differences. There are serious problems in FATA, parts of Balochistan and Karachi. Ongoing violence – religious and sectarian, conveys the impression that the whole of Pakistan is on fire. In reality, if one makes an objective analysis in terms of provinces at the national level, and districts at the provincial levels, the stability scenario would be remarkably different.

Consider the following numbers: During 2007-2009, Pakistan witnessed fifty to seventy suicide attacks on an average in one year. However, further analysis highlights that most of them occurred in NWFP and FATA. An analysis of violent incidents in the last two years reveals that there are more than 18,000 casualties all over Pakistan; however, most of them have been in NWFP and FATA. Of the 95 suicide attacks in Pakistan during 2008-09, only 32 took place outside the NWFP and FATA. Punjab and Sindh, barring a few violent incidents in Karachi, Lahore and Rawalpindi, have remained peaceful.

The case of India is similar, when it comes to violence in J&K, Northeast and Central India. In J&K, of the three regions – Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh, the last has remained peaceful, except for the military conflict in Kargil during 1999. Today, the entire Jammu region is violence free; unrest is more due to communal and ethnic differences, rather than due to militancy related issues. Even in the Kashmir valley, barring the districts of Baramulla, Sopore and Anantnag, the other districts are relatively free of militant violence. In Central India – three States have serious problems with Naxal violence, namely Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and Orissa.

Clearly, the States in South Asia have been able to sustain, perform and even deliver at the national level, despite their failure in parts. What needs to be researched and empirically arrived at is a threshold or a critical level, in which the States of South Asia could continue to function at the national level, despite failure in some regions. A difficult question to answer, though one might conclude that the present percentage, though unacceptable, is manageable. How to find this threshold and empirically prove its limits would require more research and innovative methodologies applicable to South Asia.



Today, inside Pakistan, Punjab, especially the Southern districts are under increasing stress. So are those districts in the NWFP that border FATA. From Bannu and Dera Ismail Khan in the south to Peshawar and then to Swat in the north, the settled districts of NWFP are under stress due to Taliban onslaught. Fortunately, the State has been successful so far in resisting any Taliban takeover. Despite their earnest efforts, the Taliban has not been able to impose their writ in the settled districts of NWFP, except in Swat. Any citizen of Pakistan can visit these districts, and does not need any permission from the Taliban, unlike in certain Tribal Agencies of the FATA.

In South Punjab, though serious sectarian violence and the fear of Taliban have established a foothold, the State has not failed in any of these districts. Undoubtedly, there are serious problems of governance; educational institutions have failed to function and delivery mechanisms in the State face serious inadequacies – from water supply to electricity. The local civil society is afraid that given the economic situation and the failure of the State to provide social services in this region, the Taliban will find ready supporters for its cause,

What will happen, if the settled districts of NWFP and South Punjab fall under the Taliban influence? What if parts of Karachi become both ungoverned and ungovernable, in tandem with the Taliban's expansion of influence into South Punjab? A hypothetical question indeed; but, will Pakistan function as a whole if NWFP, FATA, Balochistan, South Punjab and Karachi become ungovernable?.

#### IV

#### STEMMING THE DOWNSLIDE CAN THERE BE A QUARANTINE?

A final question in the context of failed/failing regions is – can the downside be stemmed? Can the failing/failed regions be quarantined? If they could be quarantined, could they be rejuvenated?

In certain cases, the quarantine was voluntary. For a long time, the Naxalites were confined to certain districts of Bihar and Andhra Pradesh until the 1980s and 1990s. Until 2008-09 (until the TNSM became Swat Taliban), the local jihadi group under the leadership of Sufi Mohammad, never thought of extending their movement beyond the Malakand region. In these cases, the actors who challenge the writ of state, limit themselves to a particular region. Neither the naxals until their recent push in this decade nor the TNSM until it came under the leadership of Fazlullah in Swat wanted to move beyond a certain region.

In other cases, the cancer could not spread, because of positive governance in the surrounding

regions. The Naxalites could never find their way to Hyderabad or move much beyond their base in Karimnagar district. The LTTE, despite their best efforts, could never reach Colombo, despite occasional suicide and air attacks. The TTP has been trying hard to expand its writ outside the FATA; the reality however is, that they could control only North and South Waziristan, and has a strong presence in Mohamand and Bajaur Agencies.

Despite criticism and occasional violence, the State does function in Khyber, Kurram and Orakzai agencies. The State's 'failure' or 'absence' in these tribal agencies cannot be automatically linked to the 'success' or 'presence' of any other non-state actor. Though a substantial part of Sri Lanka in the north and northeast was under the control of the LTTE, the rest of the country remained under the control of Colombo. Starting from the Katunayake airport north of Colombo to Galle in the South, the rest of Sri Lanka, despite economic hardships, functioned effectively. In fact, for a casual tourist, Nuwara Eliya and Galle (two major tourist destinations south of Colombo) were as peaceful and violence free as any other tourist destination in South Asia

Clearly, state failure, like armed groups, is a 'territorial' phenomenon in South Asia. It occurs in parts, where the state is inefficient and the region is ungoverned. One can statistically prove that those districts that are governed better, act as a bulwark against the spread of failed regions. Wherever, the adjoining regions also face the same problems of governance, the cancer has spread with ease.

Besides, the popular support for the State and non-State actors plays an important role in restricting the failure. For example, unlike in North and South Waziristan, there is not much support for the TTP in the neighbouring Kurram and Orakzai Agencies. The lack of popular support has effectively prevented their expansion into the settled districts like Kohat, Bannu and DI Khan, which share their borders with North and South Waziristan. This is also true for the failure of the local Taliban from expanding into Dir and Shangla districts from Swat, though both these districts have the same economic and political profile.

To conclude, it is reiterated that the purpose of this essay is not to find answers for state failure in parts, but to arrive at the right questions, through which these issues could be researched further.



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