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# Negotiating with the Taliban: Pakistan's Dangerous Dilemma

The newly elected Pakistani government remains at the forefront of efforts to negotiate with the Taliban. However, given its identity and ideology, Salma M Siddiqui warns that the risks of accommodation could be grave indeed.

By Salma M Siddiqui for ISN

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In the run-up to the historic 11 May 2013 elections in Pakistan, the *Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP)* launched its own campaign to “[end the democratic system](#)” in the country. In an open letter to the media, the group's leader Hekimullah Mehsud stated that campaign rallies and election booths would be targeted by suicide bombers and urged voters to stay home. Mehsud's appeal was based on religious grounds – he denounced democracy as ‘un-Islamic’ and specified three main parties that would be under fire: the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the Mutahidda Quami Movement (MQM) and the Awami National Party (ANP), all widely perceived to be secular. Mehsud followed through on his threats and all three parties lost workers and politicians to TTP attacks.

Other political parties, however, including Imran Khan's Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) and Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), were not targeted by the TTP, despite taking part in the ‘un-Islamic’ democratic process. As a result, they were ‘free’ to hold mass rallies and campaign in peace. The PML-N went on to win the majority of the seats and the PTI formed the government in the critical province of Khyber Pakhtoun Khua (KPK). Although it is likely that the PML-N and PTI would have won the election regardless, due to the previous government's perceived incompetence, it is important to note that the TTP was willing to selectively dismiss its anti-democratic dogma for the sake of political expediency.

The hallmark of the PTI and PML-N's foreign policy manifesto was the vow to stop drone strikes and initiate a negotiation process with the Taliban. These objectives were amenable to the TTP (and its splinter groups) as drone strikes have caused substantial losses within its hierarchy and negotiations could potentially lead to a power-sharing deal giving the TTP movement a degree of legitimacy. For example, the opening of the Qatar office accorded the Afghan Taliban limited diplomatic status.

Significantly, however, PTI and PML-N's policy objectives also converged with Pakistani public opinion. Although most Pakistanis remain uncomfortable about the negotiation process, they oppose drone strikes based on the widespread perception that these attacks violate Pakistan's sovereignty and result in collateral damage. A leaked Pakistani report recently published by the [Bureau of Investigative Journalism](#) claims that between 2006-2009 at least 147 civilians were killed in drone

attacks, out of which 94 were children. Hence, by simply pursuing the median voter, the PML-N and PTI managed to achieve a ceasefire of sorts with the *TTP*.

Endemic questions have been raised about whether the Taliban enjoys widespread support in Pakistan. Election Day provided the answer. Despite threats to voters and bombings throughout the day, numerous [reports](#) indicate that the May 2013 election had the highest voter turnout in Pakistan's history. Most Pakistanis willingly defied the *TTP*'s fatwas and proceeded to cast their votes. The question that now remains is whether the new government will support the resolve of the people, or jeopardize their rights through accommodation with the *TTP* and the Taliban.

### **The identity of the *TTP***

The *TTP* and associated groups have repeatedly asserted their disregard for fundamental human rights. Since 2008, [5,152](#) civilians have died in bomb blasts and suicide attacks for which the *TTP* and its splinter groups have claimed responsibility. The *TTP* has targeted minority groups, schools, teachers, schoolchildren, and girls in particular. A total of [118 schools](#), most of which were primary schools, have reportedly been damaged or destroyed in armed attacks. On 9 October 2012, *TTP* gunmen shot and seriously injured 14 year-old Malala Yousafzai and two other schoolgirls who were returning from school in Mingora, KPK. Malala Yousafzai is a known child activist who spoke out against the closure of girls' schools by the *TTP* in the Swat valley. A more recent attack killed [14 female students](#) in Quetta and as the victims were taken to the hospital, an attacker struck there as well. Ever since the CIA's use of a local doctor in the hunt for Osama Bin Laden was revealed, attacks against [medical personnel](#) have also risen. Eleven health workers administering polio vaccinations to children were killed and 4 more injured in targeted attacks in 2012.

The *TTP*'s track record leaves no room for ambiguity. Their stance regarding most issues, including women and minority groups, has remained unaltered and there are no indications that they are willing to make long-term changes to their policies. A week before he was due to be sworn in, Nawaz Sharif approached a hardline Islamist leader and politician, Sami ul Haq, and asked him to act as his envoy to the Taliban insurgents. Haq, also known as the '[Godfather of the Taliban,](#)' agreed to serve as an intermediary. Despite these overtures, Ehsanullah Ehsan, the *TTP* spokesman stated that they would continue to attack those who oppose his organization. Although no incidents have occurred in Lahore and majority of the Punjab province – the stronghold of Sharif's party -- the rest of the country continues to experience attacks. More recently, a double [bomb attack](#) was conducted against the frequently targeted Shia minority group in Parachinar, a tribal town west of Peshawar, killing 57 and injuring 167. On [July 29](#) *TTP* militants in police uniform attacked the Central Jail in Dera Ismail Khan and managed to free around 247 inmates, while killing at least 11 people.

While the *TTP* continues violent assaults against local targets, PTI leader Imran Khan and PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif have repeatedly asserted that the effort to combat the group is not '[our war](#)' They have stated that Pakistanis should not be involved in what they perceive to be an American venture. While their sentiments are not unpopular, there are key segments of the population – including many serving in law enforcement and the armed forces– which do not agree. As a senior police officer in Peshawar [retorted](#), 'What we need is a pat on the back, not daily derision; If Khan says this is not our war, then what does he think we are doing here sacrificing our lives?' Pakistan has lost [49,000](#) residents during the war on terror out of which 15,681 were members of the armed forces. As the Pakistani government attempts to facilitate a negotiation process, it is imperative to avoid polarizing or isolating important segments of the country. As another police officer from Peshawar reported, 'Our political leadership is confused when it comes to the Taliban, and that is undermining police morale and hindering us in our job.'

### **The dangers of accommodation**

In April 2009, the Pakistani government, then headed by PPP leader Asif Zardari, concluded a [peace agreement \(Nizam e Adl\)](#) with a group allied to the *TTP*, the [Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi](#) (TNSM). The government allowed the implementation of Islamic Law (shariah) in Malakand district with the specific clauses that the interpretation of the law would be according to the sects of the persons involved in disputes, and that the judges (Qazi's) would be appointed by the central government. After the agreement, the TNSM leader Maulana Fazlullah (a.k.a Radio Mullah) used illegal radio stations to indoctrinate women and threaten those who remained unconvinced with acts of violence, thereby limiting their mobility, education and access to health stations. Girls' schools were burned down and women were not allowed to leave the house without male relatives. The agreement was short-lived, however: the Taliban soon began to appoint its own judges and eventually laid siege to a police station, before the Pakistani military commenced operation *Rah-e-Rahst* against the Taliban in the district. Until now, no further open attempts were made to reach an agreement.

Although the *TTP* has not yet come to the negotiating table due to continuing drone strikes, the ruling parties are already engaging in alarming practices, raising fears that women's rights and liberties may be further undermined should negotiations materialize. Pre-election [reports](#) revealed that women would not be allowed to vote in parts of KPK – with the tacit approval of the PPP, ANP, JUI-F, PML-N, JI and PTI. In Lower Dir, following an agreement among the major political parties, women were again prevented from voting in the polls. In the Buner district, leaders from the winning party PML-N and *Jamaat I Islami* entered into a similar agreement to bar women from casting votes in the provincial assembly's PK-78 constituency. In Swat district's Amankot village, a Jirga attended by elders and political candidates from PPP, JI, PML-N, ANP and PTI decided that the village women would not cast their votes in the upcoming election. The decision stripped 138,905 registered female voters of their constitutional right to vote. As a result of this agreement, the district representatives for one national assembly seat and three provincial assembly seats were elected by only men. In the KPK, where PTI formed the government, all 12 elected ministers were male. The Social Welfare and Women Development Ministry, which was the focal point working on women's issues and empowerment was merged with the Zakat and Ushr Ministry – which is a completely unrelated issue and deals with Islamic charity.

However, these views continue to be resisted by women of KPK in various ways. The women of Swat district, in an independent initiative, set up an [all-female Jirga](#). Tabbassum Adnan, head of the all-female Jirga says she first asked to join the main Swat Qaumi Aman Jirga to ensure justice for women but was refused. As she explained: “we have formed our own jirga now and we will decide cases involving women. Our only aim is to provide legal support to women which we are doing by involving police and government authorities.” Based in Mingora, Adnan has thus far been successful in seeking legal aid, organizing protests and helping women register cases with the authorities.

As Pakistan's ruling elite moves towards dialogue with the Taliban, there is a sense of fear that concessions will be made that jeopardize efforts such as Adnan's. While it comes as no surprise that the *TTP* has been adamant in its refusal to recognize Pakistan's constitution and laws, it is distressing when the state not only fails to extend constitutional rights to all its citizens but circumvents these rights intentionally. Given the dangerous precedents set in past negotiations (2009) and elections (2013), any agreements with these groups must keep the integrity of all citizens in mind if security and liberty are not to become mutually exclusive.

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For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Domination of Pakistan by Radical Islamists](#)

[Pakistan's Role and Strategic Priorities in Afghanistan since 1980](#)

[Pakistan: Countering Militancy in PATA](#)

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