# The Role of Islam in Pakistan's Future

Although listed among the U.S. allies in the war on terrorism, Pakistan cannot easily be characterized as either friend or foe. Indeed, Pakistan has become a major center of radical Islamist ideas and groups, largely because of its past policies toward India and Afghanistan. Pakistan supported Islamist militants fighting Indian rule in the disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir and backed the Taliban in its pursuit of a client regime in Afghanistan. Since the September 11 attacks, however, the selective cooperation of Pakistan's president and military ruler, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, in sharing intelligence with the United States and apprehending Al Qaeda members has led to the assumption that Pakistan might be ready to give up its long-standing ties with radical Islam.

Nevertheless, Pakistan's status as an Islamic ideological state is rooted deeply in history and is linked closely both with the praetorian ambitions of the Pakistani military and the Pakistani elite's worldview. For the foreseeable future, Islam will remain a significant factor in Pakistan's politics. Musharraf and his likely successors from the ranks of the military will continue to seek U.S. economic and military assistance with promises of reform, but the power of such promises is tempered by the strong links between Pakistan's military-intelligence apparatus and extremist Islamists.

Pakistan's future direction is crucial to the U.S.-led war on terrorism, not least because of Pakistan's declared nuclear weapons capability. The historic alliance between Islamists and Pakistan's military has the potential to frustrate antiterrorist operations, radicalize key segments of the Islamic world, and bring India and Pakistan to the brink of war yet again. Unless Pakistan's all-powerful military can be persuaded to cede power gradually to secular ci-

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vilians and allow the secular politics of competing economic and regional interests to prevail over religious sentiment, the country's vulnerability to radical Islamic politics will not wane. With the backing of the U.S. government, the Pakistani military would probably be able to maintain a façade of stability over the next several years but, bolstered by U.S. support, would also want to maintain preeminence and is likely to make concessions to Islamists to legitimize its control of the country's polity. The United States is supporting Pakistan's military so that Pakistan backs away from Islamist radicalism, albeit gradually. In the process, however, the military's political ambitions are being encouraged, compromising change and preserving the influence of radical Islamists. Democratic reform that allows secular politicians to compete for power freely is more likely to reduce this influence.

### Weakness of the Pakistani State

The disproportionate focus of the Pakistani state since its independence in 1947 on ideology, military capability, and external alliances has weakened Pakistan internally. The country's institutions, ranging from schools and universities to the judiciary, are in a state of general decline. The economy's stuttering growth is dependent largely on the level of concessional flows of external resources. Pakistan's gross domestic product (GDP) stands at about \$75 billion in absolute terms and \$295 billion in purchasing power parity, making Pakistan's economy the smallest of any country that has tested nuclear weapons thus far. Pakistan suffers from massive urban unemployment, rural underemployment, illiteracy, and low per capita income. One-third of the population lives below the poverty line, and another 21 percent subsists just above it.

Soon after independence, 16 percent of Pakistan's population was literate, compared with 18 percent of India's significantly larger population. By 2003, India had managed to attain a literacy rate of 65 percent, but Pakistan's stood at only about 35 percent. Today, Pakistan allocates less than 2 percent of its GDP for education and ranks close to the bottom among 87 developing countries in the amount allotted to primary schools. Its low literacy rate and inadequate investment in education has led to a decline in Pakistan's technological base, which in turn hampers the country's economic modernization. With an annual population growth rate of 2.7 percent, the state of public health care and other social services in Pakistan is also in decline. Meanwhile, Pakistan spends almost 5 percent of its GDP on defense and is still unable to match the conventional forces of India, which outspends Pakistan 3 to 1 while allocating less than 2.5 percent of its GDP to military spending.

Pakistan's military dominance can be traced back to the early years of its statehood. The partition of British India's assets in 1947 left Pakistan with one-third of the British Indian army and only 17 percent of its revenues. Thus, the military started out as the dominant institution in the new state, and this dominance has continued over the years. Since Gen. Ayub Khan assumed power in 1958, ruling through martial law, the military has directly or indirectly dominated Pakistani politics, set Pakistan's ideological and national security agenda, and repeatedly intervened to direct the course of do-

mestic politics. On four occasions, despite the constant rewriting of its constitution ostensibly to pave the way for sustained democracy, generals seized power directly, claiming that civilian politicians were incapable of running the country. Even during periods of civilian government, the generals have exercised political influence through the intelligence apparatus, notably the Interservices Intelligence (ISI) organization. The ISI plays a behind-thescenes role in exaggerating political divisions

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to justify military intervention. Partly due to the role of the military and partly because of their own weakness, Pakistan's political factions have often found it difficult to cooperate with one another or to submit to the rule of law. As a result, Pakistan is far from developing a consistent system form of government, with persisting political polarization along three major, intersecting fault lines: between civilians and the military, among different ethnic and provincial groups, and between Islamists and secularists.

The first crack in contemporary Pakistan's body politic continues to be this perennial dispute over who should wield political power. Musharraf has described Pakistan as "a very difficult country to govern" in view of its myriad internal and external difficulties. Musharraf's view reflects the thinking of the Pakistani military and is possibly self-serving. The military does not allow politics to take its course, periodically accusing elected leaders of compromising national security or of corruption. Repeated military intervention has deprived Pakistan of political leaders with experience governing, leading to serious lapses under civilian rule. Because the military periodically co-opts or fires civilian politicians, established and accepted rules for political conduct have failed to evolve. Issues such as the role of religion in matters of state, the division of power between various branches of government, and the authority of the provinces are not settled by constitutional means or through a vote. The military does not let civilians rule, but its own rule lacks legitimacy in the eyes of the general public, creating an atmosphere of

permanent friction. Thus, instead of governing, Pakistan's rulers, including Musharraf, have been reduced to managing ethnic, religious, and provincial tensions.

The second major source of conflict in Pakistan is based on these ethnic and provincial differences. Although the majority of Pakistan's ethnically disparate population has traditionally identified with secular politicians, that majority has not always determined the direction of Pakistan's policies, even when its opinion is expressed in a free and fair election. Highly centralized and unrepresentative governance has created grievances among different ethnic groups, and the state has yet to create any institutional mechanisms for dealing with such discontent. The constitutional provisions relating to provincial autonomy, which could placate each province by allowing self-government, have often been bypassed in practice. Intraprovincial differences, such as those between the Baluchis and the Pashtuns in Baluchistan, between the Punjabis and Saraiki in Punjab, between the Pashtuns and Hindko speakers in the North West Frontier Province, and between the Sindhis and Mohajirs in Sindh, have also festered without political resolution.

The third relates to the ideological division over the role of Islam in national life. Having started out as a pressure group outside the Pakistani parliament, Pakistan's religious parties have now become a well-armed and well-financed force that wield considerable influence within different branches of government. Religious groups have benefited from the patronage of the military and civil bureaucracy, which has viewed them as useful tools in perpetuating the military's control over foreign and domestic policy. Because the Islamist worldview is incompatible with the vision of a modern Pakistan, the violent vigilantism of some Islamists has become a serious threat to Pakistani civil society and has also promoted sectarian terrorism. Operating outside the framework of the rule of law, the Islamists have the potential to disrupt the conduct of foreign policy, especially in view of their support for anti-India militants in Kashmir and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

# Islam and the Rise of Militancy

Radical Islamic groups, which portray themselves as the guardians of Pakistan's ideology, have had a special status conferred on them by the military and civil bureaucracy that normally governs Pakistan. The Islamists claim that they are the protectors of Pakistan's nuclear deterrent capability, as well as the champion of the national cause of securing Kashmir for Pakistan. Secular politicians who seek greater autonomy for Pakistan's different regions or demand that religion be kept out of the business of the state have come under attack from the Islamists for deviating from Pakistan's ideology.

Establishing Islam as the state ideology was a device aimed at defining a Pakistani identity during the country's formative years. Indeed, Pakistan's leaders started playing on religious sentiment as a means of strengthening the country's national identity shortly after Pakistan's inception. Emerging from the partition of British India in 1947 as the result of a relatively short independence movement, Pakistan faced several challenges to its survival, beginning with India's perceived reluctance to accept Pakistan's creation. Pakistan's secular elite used Islam as a national rallying cry against perceived

and real threats from predominantly Hindu India. They assumed that the country's clerics and Islamists were too weak and too dependent on the state to confront the power structure. Therefore, unsure of their fledgling nation's future, the politicians, civil servants, and military officers who led Pakistan in its formative years decided to exacerbate the antagonism between Hindus and Muslims that had led to partition as a means of defining a distinctive identity for Pakistan, with "Islamic

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Pakistan" resisting "Hindu India." Notwithstanding periodic peace processes, hostility between India and Pakistan continues, and in Pakistan it serves as an important element of national identification.

This political commitment to an "ideological state" gradually evolved into a strategic commitment to exporting jihadist ideology for regional influence. During the Bangladesh crisis in 1971, the Pakistani military used Islamist rhetoric and the help of Islamist groups to exclude elected secular leaders supported by the majority Bengali-speaking population from power in East Pakistan prior to its secession. The Bengalis' rebellion, with India's assistance, and their brutal suppression by the Pakistani military followed an election that would have given power to Bengali politicians in a united Pakistan. After the 1971 war, Pakistan was bifurcated with the birth of an independent Bangladesh, exacerbating Pakistan's insecurity.

Whereas India and Bangladesh have each evolved as secular democracies focused on economic development, Pakistan continues to be ruled by a civil-military oligarchy that sees itself as defining and also protecting the state's identity, mainly through a mix of religious and militarist nationalism. Hence, in western Pakistan, the effort to create national cohesion between Pakistan's disparate ethnic and linguistic groups through religion assumed greater significance, and its manifestations became more militant. Religious groups, armed or unarmed, gradually became more powerful as a result of this alliance between the mosque and the military. Radical and violent manifesta-

tions of Islamist ideology, which sometimes appear to threaten Pakistan's stability even today, can be seen in some ways as a state project gone awry.

Pakistan's rulers have traditionally attempted to "manage" militant Islamism, trying to calibrate it so that it serves the state's nation-building function without destabilizing internal politics or relations with Western countries. Pakistan's emphasis on its Islamic identity increased significantly as the civilian semiauthoritarian government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971–

Musharraf has continued to use Islamists for political purposes. 1977) channeled Pakistan's Islamic aspirations toward foreign policy. Pakistan played a key role in developing the Organization of Islamic Conference and opened up to special relations with Islamic groups and countries.

Gen. Zia-ul Haq's military regime (1977–1988) took matters a step further domestically, basing Pakistan's legal and educational system on Islamic law, formalizing the preexisting state ideology into an official policy of Islamization.

Through his Islamization efforts, Zia made Pakistan an important ideological and organizational center of the global Islamist movement, including its leading role in the anti-Soviet campaign in Afghanistan in the 1980s by allowing Afghanistan's mujahideen to operate from bases in Pakistan, inflicting a heavy toll on the Red Army.

The success of the jihadist experiment against the Soviets encouraged Pakistan's strategic planners to expand the jihad against India and into post-Soviet Central Asia. Pakistan's sponsorship of the Taliban in Afghanistan, together with the presence in its territory of Islamist militants from all over the world, derived from Islamabad's desire to emerge as the center of a global Islamic resurgence. Ironically, religious fervor did not motivate all Pakistani leaders who supported this strategy; in most cases, they simply embraced Islam as a politico-military strategic doctrine that would enhance Pakistan's prestige and position in the world. The focus on building an ideological state, however, has subsequently caused Pakistan to lag behind in almost all areas that define a functional modern state.

In the last few years, the situation has deteriorated even further. The Islamists are not content with having a secondary role in national affairs and have acquired a momentum of their own. Years of religious rhetoric have influenced a younger generation of military officers. The ISI, in particular, includes a large number of officials who have assimilated the Islamist beliefs they were rhetorically called on to support in the course of jihad in Kashmir and Afghanistan. Because Musharraf and the Pakistani military still see secular politicians, rather than the Islamists, as their rivals for political

power, they have continued to use Islamists for political purposes. Last year, Musharraf's administration sought the backing of the Islamists for a set of constitutional amendments increasing the president's power and in return recognized an Islamist as the leader of the parliamentary opposition. Major figures of the secular opposition have been exiled or jailed on corruption or sedition charges, positioning the Islamists as Pakistan's major opposition group. This has enabled Islamists to exercise greater influence than would have been possible in an open, democratic political system, given the poor electoral performance of Islamic groups in Pakistan's intermittent elections since gaining independence.

## Some Things Never Change: Musharraf's Pakistan Today

Pakistan's Islamists made their strongest showing in a general election during parliamentary voting in October 2002, securing 11 percent of the popular vote and 20 percent of the seats in the lower house of parliament. The Musharraf regime's decision to bar two former prime ministers, Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto, and several of their followers from the election helped the Islamists achieve these electoral results. The two leading secular parties, Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), had to contend with corruption proceedings relating to their tenures in office as well as the Musharraf government's intense propaganda supporting these allegations. The candidates of the alliance of Islamic parties—the United Action Council (Mutahhida Majlis Amal [MMA])—did not face disqualification, and Islamic party leaders campaigned freely. Anti-U.S. sentiment in the areas bordering Afghanistan particularly benefited the MMA, which made electoral gains without dramatically increasing the share of votes traditionally won by Islamic parties. Secular parties suffered due to redistricting as well as the disqualification of some non-Islamist candidates. PML and PPP leaders were forced into exile, but MMA leaders could campaign freely. This ensured full turnout of Islamist voters at the polls while some supporters of the major parties did not show up to vote.

The Musharraf government now recognizes the MMA as the main opposition in parliament, even though Bhutto's PPP has the single-largest bloc of opposition parliamentarians, 81, to the MMA's 63. Critics argue that Musharraf is deliberately projecting the MMA as his primary opposition to create the illusion that radical Islamist groups are gaining power through democratic means, thus minimizing the prospect that the international community, especially the United States, will press for democratic reform in Pakistan, especially while Musharraf offers support in the war against Al Qaeda. Musharraf has also made repeated pronouncements to reassure the

world of his intention to alter Pakistan's policy direction radically since the September 11 attacks, moving it away from its Islamist and jihadist past. Musharraf's administration continues to project the war on terrorism as a U.S. war being waged with Pakistani help, even after attempts on his life and that of his handpicked prime minister, Shaukat Aziz. Islamabad continues to make a distinction between foreign fighters, such as those from Al Qaeda, whom Pakistani forces have been pursuing, and homegrown terrorists who were originally trained to fight Indian troops in Kashmir. Musharraf is, in fact, even reversing Zia's course of Islamization but only marginally. The government now encourages women's participation in public life, and cultural events involving song and dance are openly allowed, even encouraged. State-owned media has become more culturally liberal, and private radio and television stations with unrestricted entertainment content have been permitted. Controversial Islamic laws, however, such as those relating to blasphemy and *Hudood* (Islamic limits), have not been withdrawn.

Still, although Musharraf speaks of a vision of "enlightened moderation" for Pakistan, contradictions in his domestic, regional, and international policies are apparent. The greatest commitment he has demonstrated thus far is his view that he is indispensable to Pakistan and that Pakistan is safer under the stewardship of the military rather than under civilian democratic rule. This duality in speaking of enlightened moderation while keeping alive the perception that he is faced with Islamist opposition justifies military intervention and governance and reflects the structural problem in Pakistan's politics, a situation created by the weakness of civilian institutions and the armed forces' dominance of decisionmaking.

Islam has therefore become the central issue in Pakistani politics because of conscious and consistent state policy aimed at excluding secular politicians from power while maintaining a centralized state controlled by the military and civil bureaucracy, not just as the inadvertent outcome of decisions made after the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, as has been widely assumed. Pakistan's self-characterization as an Islamic ideological state is thus unlikely to change in the near term. The country's population remains fractured by ethnic and linguistic differences, with Islam being used as the common bond in an attempt to achieve unity.

# U.S. Policy Response (or Lack Thereof)

On several occasions, Pakistan has been seen as a state on the brink of failure, temporarily restored with U.S. military and economic assistance only to return to the brink again. Pakistan, suffering from chronically weak state institutions, continues to face a deep identity crisis and a rising threat from in-

dependent, radical Islamists. The government's fears about its viability and security have led Islamabad to seek an alliance with the United States while pursuing a nuclear deterrent and subconventional military capability, that is, Islamist terrorism, against India. The U.S. response to the September 11 attacks left Pakistan with little choice but to turn more drastically toward the United States. Confronted with an ultimatum to choose between being with the United States or against it, Pakistan's generals opted to revive the alliance. At every stage since, however, Pakistan has proven to be a U.S. ally of convenience, not of conviction, seeking specific rewards for specific actions.

Pakistan has historically been willing to adjust its priorities to fit within the parameters of immediate U.S. global concerns. The purpose has been to ensure the flow of military and economic aid from the United States, which Pakistan considers necessary for its struggle for survival and its competition with India. The military, which has dominated the Pakistani state since the mid-1950s, has embraced a tri-

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partite policy that emphasizes Islam as a national unifier, rivalry with India as the principal objective of the state's foreign policy, and an alliance with the United States as a means to defray the costs of Pakistan's massive military expenditures. Ironically, these policy precepts have served to encourage extremist Islamism, which in the last few years has been the source of threats both to U.S. interests and global security.

The United States even recognized the troubling potential of Islamist politics in the very first years of U.S. engagement with Pakistan. In a policy statement issued on July 1, 1951, the U.S. Department of State declared that, "[a]part from Communism, the other main threat to American interests in Pakistan was from 'reactionary groups of landholders and uneducated religious leaders' who were opposed to the 'present Western-minded government' and 'favor a return to primitive Islamic principles.'" However, over the last four decades—until September 11—the U.S. government did little to discourage Islamabad's embrace of obscurantist Islam as its state ideology, empowering Pakistan's religious leaders beyond their support among the populace and tying the Islamists to Pakistan's military-civil bureaucracy and intelligence apparatus.

Washington has never been able to develop a policy that exclusively focuses on dealing with Islamabad and its dysfunction. Instead, Pakistan has generally been placed into broader U.S. policy objectives: containment of communism in the 1950s and 1960s, restrictions on Soviet expansion in Af-

ghanistan during the 1980s, nuclear nonproliferation during the 1990s, and the war on terrorism since September 11. Washington's quid pro quo approach in dealing with Pakistan has often helped confront the issue at hand while creating another security problem down the road. Gen. Ayub Khan had found U.S. eagerness to contain communism during the 1950s useful to extract the right price for Pakistan's participation in anti-Communist treaties. U.S. Cold War support subsequently enabled the Pakistani military to use force in the Bangladesh crisis of 1971, leading to Pakistan's bifurcation.

History repeated itself when the Soviet Union's occupation of Afghanistan in 1979 made Pakistan a front-line state in resisting Communist expansion. Just as General Khan had previously, Zia bargained for more aid in return for allowing Pakistan to be the staging ground for an anti-Soviet insurgency during the 1980s. Zia also used the cover of the Afghan jihad to acquire nuclear weapons capabilities for Pakistan, circumventing U.S. legislation aimed at nonproliferation. With help from the United States, Zia also modernized Pakistan's military and prepared for a broader jihad to expand Pakistan's influence in the region, building a cadre of Islamist guerrillas and giving rise to Pakistan's ambitions to create a client regime in Afghanistan, which in turn resulted in the Taliban's ascendancy and ability to provide sanctuary for Al Qaeda. Washington's preoccupation with the success of the anti-Soviet struggle enabled Pakistan to defeat two U.S. objectives (nuclear nonproliferation and security in the Middle East and South Asia) while attaining one (the end of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan) and empowered an entirely new threat of radical Islamic terrorism.

In some ways, Islamabad's relationship with Washington has become a contributing factor to the Pakistani crisis by allowing Pakistan's leaders to believe that they can continue to promote risky domestic, regional, and pan-Islamic policies. The availability of U.S. assistance, offered to secure Pakistani cooperation in U.S. grand strategy, has exacerbated Pakistan's dysfunction and its structural flaws.

# The Solution: A Man or a System?

Currently, U.S. hopes in Pakistan are pinned to Musharraf's commitment to U.S. interests. Assassination attempts on Musharraf, from which he has narrowly escaped, have raised the question of whether U.S. policy interests would be adequately served beyond Musharraf's indefinite tenure. Although it may be difficult for U.S. and Pakistani policymakers to force an end to Pakistan's status as an Islamic ideological state, changes in the nature of the Pakistani state can gradually wean the country away from Islamic extremism. Musharraf can't. Over the years, military rule has fomented religious

militancy in Pakistan. Under military leadership, Pakistan has defined its national objective as wresting Kashmir from India and, in recent years, establishing a client regime in Afghanistan. Unless Islamabad's objectives are redefined to focus on economic prosperity and popular participation in governance, which the military remains institutionally reluctant to do, the state will continue to turn to Islam as a national unifier.

If Pakistan proceeded along the path of normal political and economic development, it would not need the exaggerated political and strategic role

for Islam that has characterized much of its history. The United States, for its own interests, cannot afford the current rise in Islamic militancy in a large Muslim country that has nuclear weapons capabilities, a large standing army, and a huge intelligence service capable of conducting covert operations to destabilize neighboring governments in the Persian Gulf, South Asia, and Central Asia.

Islamabad's relationship with Washington has contributed to the Pakistani crisis.

The influence of Islamists in Pakistan can perhaps be best contained through democ-

racy. In elections, a majority of Pakistanis has repeatedly demonstrated that the populace does not share the Islamist vision for the country. Despite the MMA's unprecedented electoral performance in 2002, the alliance garnered only 11 percent of the total votes cast. The Islamist vote as a percentage of total registered voters has been more or less stagnant since the 1970s. The strength of the Islamists, however, lies in their ability to mobilize financial and human resources. Islamists run schools, operate charities, and publish newspapers; moreover, they are able to put their organized cadres on the streets. Thus, in the absence of democratic decisionmaking, the Islamists can dominate the political discourse. Pakistan's secular civil society is either apolitical or insufficiently organized, and secular political parties have consistently been dismembered by successive military governments.

Strengthening civil society and building secular political parties as a countervailing force in Pakistan can contain the demands for Islamization made by the religious parties and radical Islamist groups. Whenever an elected political leader has rejected Islamists' demands, fears of a backlash have failed to materialize. Between 1972 and 1977, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was able to successfully expand the role of women in the public arena despite Islamist opposition, and in 1997, Prime Minister Sharif faced only a limited reaction when he reversed the decision to observe Friday as a weekly religious holiday. Conversely, the Islamists have won their major policy victories thanks to regimes seeking their support to garner political legitimacy or to

achieve strategic objectives. Unlike the situation in Muslim countries such as Egypt and Turkey, the Pakistani state and particularly the military have encouraged political and radical Islam, which otherwise has a relatively narrow base of support. Democratic consensus on limiting or reversing Islamization would gradually roll back the Islamist influence in Pakistani public life. The Islamists would maintain their role as a minority pressure group representing a particular point of view, but they would stop wielding their current

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disproportionate influence over the country's overall direction.

The United States can help contain the Islamists' influence by demanding reform of Pakistan's governance. Washington should not condone the Pakistani military's support for Islamic militants, its use of the intelligence apparatus for controlling domestic politics, and its refusal to cede power to a constitutional democratic government. In its role as an aid donor, Washington has become

one of Islamabad's most important benefactors. A large part of U.S. economic assistance since the September 11 attacks, however, has been used to pay down Pakistan's foreign debt. Because Washington has attached few conditions to U.S. aid, the spending patterns of Pakistan's government have not changed significantly. The country's military spending continues to increase, and spending for social services is well below the level required to improve living conditions for ordinary Pakistanis. Consequently, the United States should use its aid as a lever to influence Pakistan's domestic policies. Even though Musharraf's cooperation in hunting down Al Qaeda terrorists is a positive development, Washington must not ignore Pakistan's state sponsorship of Islamist militants, its pursuit of nuclear weapons and missiles at the expense of education and health care, and its refusal to democratize. Each of these issues is directly linked to the future of Islamic radicalism in Pakistan.

#### Notes

- 1. "Win-Win Situation for Pakistan, Says Musharraf," November 27, 2001, http://www.sindh.gov.pk/press\_release/win\_situation.htm (accessed October 6, 2004) (press release by the Government of Sindh).
- 2. As cited in Ayesha Jalal, *The State of Martial Rule* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 127.