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Geopolitics in South Asia

Pakistan, theatre of war

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With the summary execution of Osama bin Laden on the orders of Barack Obama in May 2011, Pakistan returned to the top of the international agenda. Some have said that the disappearance of the leader of al-Qaida did not change much. That may be true for the Arab world. But for Washington and Islamabad [1], the case is far from incidental. It sharpens the contradictions at work in Pakistani society. It highlights the conflicts of interest that undermine the alliance with the United States. [This article was written in French in May 2011 and has only now been translated into English by *International Viewpoint*.]

However, Pakistan is a key piece in a geostrategic area ranging from former Soviet republics of Central Asia to China. The consequences of the "Geronimo" operation will not only be local. [2]

This article will only focus on Pakistan, but will nevertheless begin with a brief detour on the United States. The summary execution of bin Laden during a major political offensive aimed at rehabilitating American imperialism, which had been undermined in the eyes of public opinion through the lies and scandals of the Bush era, giving a new legitimacy to targeted assassinations, the hell of Guantanamo prison (which Obama promised to close), the use of torture (the hunt for bin Laden is believed to have been facilitated by a confession obtained under repeated torture), the need for secret intervention on foreign soil in the name of national interest, the setting aside of any rule of law and morality... All of this is set against an ideological background of extreme nationalism by a great power.

This ideological offensive is even more pernicious because it is led by Obama, a black Democratic president whose election had raised the enthusiasm of many progressives in the United States and across the world.

Let's return to Pakistan. The case of bin Laden revives the image of a country where the population is held hostage to regional conflicts – the Afghanistan war and confrontation with India – Islamic terrorism, the intelligence services, the military and profiteering war lords, the pressure of foreign intervention (mostly from the United States, but also Saudi Arabia and many others). Unfortunately, there is much truth in this image and we must try to understand why.

A warning: Pakistan is particularly complex – probably more than most other states. Even in relatively "simple" cases, it's never easy to perceive the realities underlying the superficial appearances. What does it mean that most Pakistanis are from the Sunni branch of Islam? How do the different tribes interrelate? How do the cultures of Urdu, Pashto, Baluchi or Sindi interrelate? What are the specific power relations in each province of today's "Pakistan" – and how do they relate at the federal level? I do not pretend to answer such questions. This article confines itself to what we can call a first level of analysis. It pursues only limited objectives: to show this complexity, evaluate the national and international issues that are features of this crisis and identify some substantive issues.

Pakistan's crisis has paroxysmal aspects, perhaps because of the conditions that led to its birth (the partition of British India in 1947), of the carelessness of its ruling classes and the historical weakness of the left. This is the case, for example, with "Talibanism", with the nuclearization of the conflict between India and Pakistan, or the successive dead ends resulting from the imperial policy of the United States. Lessons can be learned from such paroxysms that extend beyond this single region and that interest us all.

The christening present, a country on a war footing

Pakistan as a state is a late creation – in 1947 – with as a christening present the bloody population transfers made on a religious basis in the “partition” of the British Empire of India: some seventeen million were displaced in huge movements of people. The new state was formed in the north-west and north-east where Muslims were historically the majority. In addition, seven million Muslims from other regions of India also came to the new state – these are the Muhajirs.

Since the “vivisection” of 1947, there are very few Hindus in Pakistan. However, India still has a large Muslim community, which currently stands at one hundred and fifty million people, the same as Pakistan! This represents about 12% of the Indian population.

One can certainly find in Pakistan today its own ancient historical roots, particularly in its most populous provinces such as Punjab (centre) and Sindh (south). But of all the major Asian countries this is the one whose border demarcation was the most artificial. It originally consisted of two wings physically separated by the width of India, with – in the West – West Pakistan (which monopolized political power) and – in the East – East Pakistan (then demographically bigger). This part gained its independence after the 1971 war, and took the name Bangladesh.

Even after the amputation of Bangladesh (a second partition!), the borders of Pakistan are doubly artificial, drawn on the western side by British colonization and on the eastern side by the partition in 1947 – but of course closed to the north by the Himalayas (beyond which lies China) and the south by the Arabian Sea. The very name of Pakistan suggests a puzzle, forming the acronym for “Punjab, Afgania, Kashmir, Iran, Sindh, Baluchistan” – where “Afgania” means the provinces of North-West Frontier which border Afghanistan.

There is actually more common historical identity among the peoples of both sides of each boundary than between different strands of the Pakistani state: Pashtuns or Pathans in the northwest as in Afghanistan, Baluchis in the west (Iran), Punjabis and Sindhis in the east (India) or Kashmiris northeast... The eastern provinces have been deeply influenced by British rule, but the western regions much less so: the former were directly involved in the partition of 1947 and its bloody strife, not the second. Causing an influx of displaced populations, partition has further complicated the mosaic of people living in what is now Pakistan: Muslim immigrants from India, the Muhajirs have somehow taken over Karachi, alienating people from the province of Sindh.

The unification of Pakistan was never completed and irredentism or national liberation armed movements have existed for years for example in Baluchistan that has seen five wars in 1947-1949, 1955, 1958-1969, 1973-1977 (eight thousand deaths), and since 2004...

Since its foundation, Pakistan has been a country on a war footing, through internal conflicts and serious border tensions. It is also at the heart of important geostrategic issues both in South Asia and in the relations between world powers.

Geostrategic crossroads

South Asia consists of seven states (if one puts Burma in Southeast Asia), two of which are islands (Sri Lanka, Maldives) and two Himalayan (Nepal, Bhutan), with relatively small populations. The east and west ends are occupied by two of the most populous countries in the world: Pakistan (over 180 million) with its capital in Islamabad and Bangladesh (over 165 million) with its capital Dhaka. However, the whole sub-continent is dominated by a giant: India and its one billion two hundred million people with its capital New Delhi. By area, population, economy and armed forces, India has more weight than its neighbours (even if Pakistan is also equipped with nuclear weapons). It is the regional power.

In this region, Pakistani-Indian rivalry has always (that is to say, since the end of World War II) determined the policy choices of both states. Thus, Islamabad supported the government of Sri Lanka at a time when New Delhi was arming the Tamil Tigers against the Colombo regime, considered too pro-Western.

Moreover, Pakistan is geographically at the crossroads between South Asia, the Middle East and Central Asia and the former Soviet republics. It has India on its Eastern border, Afghanistan on its northwestern border, and Iran on its western border. Culturally, it is a meeting place between Iran and India. It is a Muslim country with a Sunni majority (75%) and Shia minority (20%), it is affected by the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In addition the port of Karachi (the main industrial centre of the country), is one of the best potential access routes to the ocean for oil from Central Asia.

Pakistan was an important geostrategic pawn in the era of the Cold War and the Sino-Soviet conflict. Islamabad was then supported, against New Delhi, by both Beijing and Washington. Indeed, India, though capitalist, sought Moscow's help to protect itself from imperialist domination. In addition, there was a Sino-Indian conflict superimposed on the Sino-Soviet conflict. The Himalayas was and remains a very sensitive area. A war was fought on its higher slopes, in 1962, between India and China – where the latter succeeded – over a border dispute. From Tibet to Nepal and Bhutan, the Himalayan range is the scene of intense power struggle between the two Asian giants.

Through Afghanistan and Islamist movements operating in all this part of the world, Pakistan is also involved in ongoing conflicts between major powers to define the future of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia – a region located between approximately the Caspian Sea and China, including Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (three countries bordering Afghanistan) and, slightly further north, Kyrgyzstan, where the U.S. first established their military base in this part the world, the Manas base, which is currently used to back NATO forces to the “Afpak” [3] theatre.

As a result of all this Pakistan has become a key piece in the great chess game between Washington, Beijing and Moscow that is played from the North-East Asia (Korea, Japan) to South Asia (sea lanes of the Indian Ocean), Central Asia (former Soviet republics) and the Near East (Iran). Today it is all the more significant a piece in that it has nuclear weapons.

A geostrategic crossroads, Pakistan is at the intersection of many regional and international tensions.

The wars in Afghanistan have tied everything together.

The shift from the Indian front to the Afghan front

For years, the “hot” border of Pakistan was to the east – that with India – and particularly to the north-east with the focal point that is Kashmir, a Muslim majority country which New Delhi managed to keep control to a large extent at the time of partition (but part of which is still on the Pakistani side of the border). India denies the right of self-determination to the Kashmiri and various armed resistance movements operate with the support of Islamabad, a situation justifying the maintenance of a permanent state of war between the two countries, punctuated by open military conflict (there have been four “hot” wars between Pakistan and India since 1947).

While the major military confrontations were lost by Pakistan, the latent state of war with India helped the new state to impose unity (remember however that this was not enough to prevent the loss of Bangladesh). The army and

security services (ISI) [4] could thus justify their dominance and omnipresence. Independent or separatist movements, the democratic opposition and the left could be repressed in the name of the national interest, and denounced as “fifth column”.

The conflict with India allowed the Pakistani state (in particular the Pakistani army) to establish its legitimacy. India has the useful function of “hereditary enemy”: the “partition” of 1947 created a gulf of blood that has been carefully maintained since. The ruling classes and elites on both sides of the border exploit the India-Pakistan conflict, so it is not surprising that all the negotiated peace processes between Islamabad and New Delhi have come to nothing. Today tension remains high between the two states, heightened by the massacres: Hindu terrorism against the Muslim (and Christian) population in India, Islamic terrorism endogenous to India or manipulated by Pakistan as in the murderous “attack” in Bombay (Mumbai) in 2008 by a suicide bomber.

But with the NATO war in Afghanistan, the North-West Frontier of Pakistan has become much “hotter” than its eastern border – and this changes many things. The current conflict is not with the “hereditary” enemy. On the contrary, now Pakistan is opposing its former allies: Washington and Islamabad promoted the development of Islamist movements to fight the secular regime in Kabul [5], then the Soviets after they occupied the country in 1979. Following the deadly attacks of September 11, 2001 against the Twin Towers in Manhattan and the Pentagon, the American government could easily make enemies of its friends. It was not the same for the Pakistani leaders.

Faced with the demographic strength and geographical vastness of India, only Afghanistan can, in case of war, provide Pakistan the “strategic depth” it needs to reorganize and redeploy its forces. This requires a regime favorable to Islamabad in Kabul: the Taliban provided this. Sunni fundamentalism was used as ideological cement to this geostrategic alliance, facilitated by the fact that the Pashtun tribes are occupying the territory of both sides of this very theoretical international border.

The Afghan issue has become a domestic issue in Pakistan. The situation in the two states has become so intertwined that in diplomatic circles they commonly use “Afpak” – a word to combine the two countries. Washington now treats them as a single theatre of operations.

The conflict with India bound together the Pakistani state, the Afghan conflict destabilises it.

With the intervention of NATO, the Afghan crisis became a crisis inside Pakistan. It crystallized in 2009 in the Swat valley, a Taliban stronghold in the Northwest. It is now invading the Punjab and destabilizing the country (at the same time that it fuels massive arms trafficking).

Pakistan is now sick because of Afghanistan. But the crisis that undermines the regime has other roots.

A new geopolitical instability

The days of the Cold War are behind us, days when international alliances were stable, structured by the division of the world into two “camps” in which “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” – when Pakistan could count on simultaneous and consistent support of Washington and Beijing. So, Islamabad enjoyed significant capacity to blackmail Western powers.

Since 1990 and the implosion of the USSR, geo-strategic alliances have become much more fluid in South Asia. The rapprochement between Washington and New Delhi is spectacular now, with the negotiation of a nuclear agreement

and the entry of India into the neoliberal world order. Before the parliamentary elections of May 2009, the Congress government needed the support of the parliamentary bloc controlled at the federal level by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) to ensure a majority, which gave the left the power to pressurise the government. This is no longer the case after the electoral defeat of the Indian CP. New Delhi has a freer hand again to get closer to the United States.

The General Staff of the Pakistani army is reluctant to abandon the Eastern front (India) in favor of the Western Front (Afghanistan). The Taliban and other fundamentalist movements still have a lot of support in the secret service. The Pakistani army has always played a double game on the question of Afghanistan: officially standing alongside NATO against "Islamic terrorism", while maintaining close ties with the Taliban and other religious "extremist" movements.

However, on the U.S. side, Pakistan is no longer sure of anything: it is now Washington that can increasingly blackmail Islamabad, making it more difficult for it to maintain the policy of the double game. Even though the intervention of the Americans in Afghanistan is destabilizing Pakistan and strengthening the feeling of "anti-Americanism", Washington may require more determined commitment from Islamabad against the Taliban. The U.S. government wants a return for its money: Islamabad receives a windfall in dollars for its commitment on the front line, the Pakistani army does not want to lose this. Thus, the offensive in 2009 by the Pakistani army against the Taliban in the Swat valley was unprecedented in its scope – it was far from being a cosmetic operation!

As the case of bin Laden has vividly confirmed, all this has not prevented the Inter-Service Intelligence of Pakistan (ISI) continuing their double game, keeping the goose that lays the golden eggs warm (chasing the head of al-Qaida with financial assistance supplied by the US). Bin Laden was found in Abbotabad, a town near Islamabad housing the main military academy in the country! But extending the war beyond the Swat valley simultaneously caused a shift in the previous internal equilibrium.

Since 2009, Pakistan has entered a phase of increasing instability as a result of regional and geopolitical implications in the countries involved in the war in Afghanistan.

Between the army and the Taliban

The war in Swat has illustrated how the population has found itself caught between the anvil of the fundamentalists and the hammer of the military. The Taliban imposed a theocratic dictatorship. The population was ordered to leave the area before the start of the offensive to avoid being caught up in the fighting. Refugees were left to wander on the road or dumped in refugee camps in the blistering heat (when they are used to the cool of the mountains), often abandoned without water, unable to feed or care for themselves properly, without security. With perhaps 2.5 million people displaced throughout the country, the conditions for a humanitarian crisis of great magnitude are present.

The same criminal negligence manifested itself in a new humanitarian crisis of great magnitude (directly affecting some twenty million inhabitants), during the exceptional floods of 2010.

It is unfortunately common that "bourgeois" armies show such contempt for the people they are supposed to help. But in Pakistan, it is more than that. The military has been in power for most of the time since the creation of the state. The officers took the opportunity this gave them by seizing land and other economic interests. It not only serves the ruling classes, it has become a component of it. It reproduces the traditional arrogance and denial of democracy of the great proprietors of the upper castes in a particularly unequal society.

If the Pakistani army has become a caricature of the military, it is the same for the Taliban regarding the fundamentalist movement.

The picture varies according to region, but overall, Pakistan is not a country “naturally” filled with bearded men or where women are invisible. Men often prefer to have only a proud moustache. As for Pakistani women “one of them, Benazir Bhutto, became head of state before being murdered” left to choose for themselves, may wear no headscarf or just a light one that hides nothing of the hair, ears, neck or, for working the fields, a thicker shawl to protect from the sun or the rain... The imposition of legalistic standards of behavior is not an expression of so-called “being Muslim”. It is social violence. In matters of religion (not only in Islam!), prohibitions are used to establish social and patriarchal lines of authority, and radical fundamentalists try to use and push this to extremes.

It is not enough to attach the label of a “belief” (“Muslim”, “Christian”...) in order to define a movement. A “faith based” current, as it is cautiously said today, can be very left wing (this was notably the case in Latin America with the liberation theology, or the Philippines with the theology of struggle...) or far right (see, eg, close to Bush as in the U.S.!). We must therefore understand the political function of religious movements, if the terms “belief” and “religious references” are not to become dangerously misleading.

How should we describe the radical fundamentalist movements in Pakistan and, particularly, the Taliban? Let's say (this is only an analogy) they occupy the place of fascism in Europe. They are in that sense “clerico-fascists”. Thanks to the negligence of the regime, they gain some social support and this, especially since they guarantee absolute control of men over women. People displaced by the Swat war generally denounced the Taliban's terror (but do not necessarily support the army), but some support the use of Sharia law to finally resolve legal conflicts: justice in Pakistan has been totally uninterested in this type of business (inheritance, land ownership dispute...) when it involves only the common people and if cases are heard, they are decided in favor of the wealthy, the influential, the corrupters...

The Taliban are today fighting the United States. Is this in fact “progressive anti-imperialism”? They have not changed in nature since the time that they were closely allied with the Pakistani state, supported by Washington. They were reactionary, they remain reactionaries. Alliances are made and unmade, but, seen from Pakistan, the Taliban have nothing progressive to offer, this is a constant, and that is what matters above all. They impose a totalitarian, obscurantist regime, which, though ideologically backward looking, is part of the dominant neoliberal order.

The enemies of our enemies are not necessarily our friends. From the perspective of the working classes, conflicts are not always binary, a “progressive camp” fighting a “reactionary camp”. They can be (and often are) triangular, when two opposing camps are reactionary. How to intervene in such cases is a matter of balance of forces, unfortunately, very poor in Pakistan. But it is not by lining up behind the army or supporting the Taliban that left forces can hope to improve the balance of power.

The Islamic Pandora's box

The radical fundamentalist movements are not only a creation of the “Afghan” wars, although the support received by both the ISI and the Americans to counter Moscow was very important. Their development inside Pakistan has even been promoted especially since the 1970s and 80s by the security services and the main parties and in doing so they have opened a Pandora's box.

The Pakistani state was born Muslim, but not Islamic. The affirmation of the existence of “two nations” in British India,

and thus justify partition on a religious basis certainly initiated a dangerous dynamic of ethnic cleansing. But the reference was or could be Muslim “culture” – the claimed identity was that of a culture and not specifically of a religion or a sectarian interpretation of that religion. The major parties had secular origins. The laws were inherited from the English tradition, via India, or the recognition of common, customary, tribal laws. The unfinished Islamization of the Pakistani state was imposed. The turning point occurred in the late 1970s under the military dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq.

For several decades, in order to consolidate their power, the ruling class and elites, the military and clientelist, patronage, parties have each in turn played the card of the Islamization of laws and of the Pakistani state. This led, initially, to very violent sectarian conflicts (in some years with hundreds of deaths) between Shiite and Sunni Muslims. Indeed, today still, most of the religious conflicts are opposing Islamist currents to one another, even if it is not good to belong to a religious minority (Christian, Hindu... only about 3% of the population, not to mention that the Ahmadiyya [6] are not recognized as Muslims in Pakistan), often the scapegoat of the fundamentalists.

In a second period, against the background of Afghanistan, the Taliban have taken off in Pakistan itself (today they even settle outside the Pashtun communities, particularly in Punjab). They know how to use their links with the state apparatus and the widespread rejection of the United States. They have temporarily benefited from support or tolerance in “public opinion” – the media and the middle classes. But their image of fighters or victims has been eroded due to their extreme brutality: arson of shops guilty of selling music, destruction of girls’ schools, throwing acid in the faces of women students for not wearing the veil even on the Punjab campus, summary justice and beheadings filmed and posted on the Internet, opponents slain, abductions and deadly attacks in the capital...

In February 2009, the government tried to reach a compromise with a wing of the Taliban by officially authorizing, through an alleged customary law, the imposition of Sharia (or rather a reactionary conception of “Islamic justice” [7]) in the Swat valley. There followed a succession of events that had a strong political impact on Pakistani opinion. As many commentators had predicted, the agreement has proved a fool’s bargain: far from leading to a cease-fire, the said Taliban have pushed their advantage in the neighboring provinces, advancing their military units up to a hundred kilometers of the capital.

Moreover, the Internet broadcast of a secretly filmed video helped to show what the imposition of Sharia law means in this case. It showed a young woman being whipped for misconduct. A religious leader in Swat has thrown fuel on the fire by stating that the victim should actually have been stoned to death, according to his own interpretation of the Sahria. This raised a great reaction in the country and provoked many demonstrations by women.

Under these conditions, at the outbreak of military operations in Swat, the government and the military is given a much broader support than was usually the case in the past by the same opposition parties, the media, intellectuals, NGOs and progressive organizations, “the public” in a broad sense.

The whirlpool of religious bigotry

In terms of religious sectarianism, the situation in the country is getting worse. Contrary to what many would have us believe with their social stereotypes and clichés, it is not the least educated classes which are necessarily the vector of intolerance and religious obscurantism, even though many poor families send their children to koranic schools – called madrasas – because of lack of access to public education. The educated “middle classes”, can be extremely conservative (that is currently the case in Thailand!), This is evidenced by the recent spread of the full veil in Pakistan (you don’t work in the fields in a burqa...).

Once engaged, the downward spiral of religious intolerance has no limits. A 1986 law makes blasphemy a crime punishable by death – what happened to it is a real case study. Anyone who criticizes this Act is guilty in the eyes of religious censors, of the crime of blasphemy. And on January 4, 2011, Salman Taseer, the powerful governor of Punjab province and a member of the ruling party, the PPP (Pakistan People's Party), a layman, was murdered because he had bravely defended a Christian villager, Asia Bibi, imprisoned for blasphemy and sentenced to hang.

The governor was assassinated by one of his bodyguards in front of others who refrained from intervening. Religious radicalism has penetrated the whole state apparatus. More significantly, the murderer is a Sufi, while Sufism is regarded as a tolerant and spiritual tradition of Islam. His lawyers also assure us that we cannot accuse them of extremism, since they are Sufis, that is, almost by definition tolerant. Moreover, they explain, their client is not guilty: it's not him who killed Salman Taseer, but God... Maybe the courts should condemn God?

What an irony: the fact that the Sufi community above all publicly cheered the murderer and made him a hero of Islam speaks volumes about the breakdown of Pakistani society. Four months after Salman Taseer, it was the turn of Shahbaz Bhatti, the single Christian cabinet member and Minister of Minorities, to be shot.

Half of those convicted of blasphemy belong to the small Christian minority. But this evil gnaws away at every layer, providing opportunities for just settling scores. So a doctor was sent to prison because he had thrown into the wastebasket a card from a health visitor called... Muhammad. There was also the case of the young Shiite whose motorcycle collided by accident with a monument to Muhammad. He had the double misfortune of being a Shiite, a fisherman and opposing a rival tribe over the use of a lake. He was brutally murdered while he was in custody.

Over a thousand people have been accused of blasphemy – a charge that is social death, which forces people into hiding or flight, even when it is not followed by legal condemnation. Everyone is waiting for the next religious murder of a public figure opposing this blasphemy terrorist law: MP Sherry Rehman – whom the Interior Minister said they could not protect.

Between military dictatorships and democratic clientalism

There is no power in Pakistan invested with democratic legitimacy. The country has mostly been subjected to military rule, interspersed with interludes of parliamentary rule.

"Parliamentary" and not "democratic", the distinction is important. Civilian governments have indeed been dominated by parties practising patronage, business and nepotism. The military has had a field day denouncing the parliamentary system, which is in the interests of political "clans", representing the 22 families that dominate the country. The parties have had a field day denouncing the failure of the military to sustainably manage the state. By its negligence, the general staff was able to discredit the military regimes. By their greed, "the 22 families" have managed to discredit parliamentary systems. Both shamelessly spread their corruption. Hence the alternation between the direct exercise of power by the army and the direct grip of the civilian clans in parliament – a debilitating alternation after which the country has been plunged into a deep crisis of legitimacy.

The alliance of Islamabad with Washington has exacerbated this situation. Seen from Pakistan, the United States also has no democratic legitimacy. They have supported the worst dictatorships and covered the worst corruption. They plunged Afghanistan into a war without end. They just apologize for repeated military "mistakes" which create a growing number of victims amongst the population living on the Afghan border. Bush stoked the fire of the "wars of civilization" citing *Urbi et orbi* the will of the Christian God to justify sending armies into Muslim countries – using

even blatantly false pretences as in Iraq. Despite a more cautious style, for Obama “Afpak” is the major challenge of his presidency in the region and he demands an increased right to oversee Pakistani politics. He ordered the most flagrant breach of Pakistani sovereignty by sending his commandos to kill Ben Laden.

Massive financial support flooding from the United States to Pakistan after September 11, 2001 did not improve the condition of the Pakistani people. On the contrary, the neoliberal policies advocated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), chaired by French socialist Dominique Strauss-Kahn [8], aggravated the social crisis.

Fragmented power

Pakistan appears to be a country structured by an army occupying society and controlling the state. Yet behind this facade, the power remains largely fragmented.

Because of its ubiquity and its centralized policy, the army could have been a channel for integration and unification of the elites, beyond regional differences. But this has not been the case. The officer corps was and is dominated by Punjabis. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) at one time carried progressive aspirations to create solidarities across the country “but it has been “privatized” by the Bhutto clan (Sindhi, but with strong points of support in the Punjab), becoming a party based on patronage like the others. Far from uniting the people, Islamism and fundamentalism have heightened sectarian strife. The specific interests of each power centre prevailed everywhere, and, even at the expense of the collective interest of the ruling classes and elites “a collective interest of the property-owning classes that no political force has been able to carry forward once the momentum of the foundation of Pakistan was exhausted.

The privatization of power led to its fragmentation among large families, military fractions community structures... Depending on the balance of power and “customs”, laws apply differently in different places “and not at all when the local “lords” do not want it. Politics, which requires large investments in order to be elected, is seen as a business that must be profitable “thus in the eyes of the wealthy, corruption is the (legitimate) means of ensuring profitability. Alliances fluctuate like shifting sands in the interests of each clan or tribal council. They are all managing the interests of their clients.

Conflicts operate simultaneously on several levels: sectarian wars between Muslim denominations, sectarian violence (Muhajirs against Sindhis, Punjabis against Sindhis, Muslims against Christians...), killings between rival political clans, between tribes, army against citizens, property owners against the exploited, patriarchal power against women... A seemingly simple series of conflicts “political or religious “often hide others, deeper, more complex. For example, the Taliban claim to participate in a global jihad, but the Pashtun tribes of Northwest Pakistan amongst which they are based are engaged in very local power struggles, requiring shifting alliances between clans.

A conflict can be “structural”, ensuring stable groupings of forces and the creation of sustainable political projects. This is not the case today in Pakistan. In fact, the whole Pakistani state may fall apart tomorrow. Let us remember it is a nuclear state.

A new geostrategy

Operation “Geronimo” caused a political storm in Pakistan and so far one fatal attack in retaliation “but so far little popular mobilization (the reaction is less intense than after the release of David Ramond, a CIA officer who shot two

Pakistanis in Lahore in broad daylight). The government is accused at the same time of letting the United States violate the sovereignty of the country, having protected Bin Laden, and being unaware what its secret services were doing. The political crisis is deep, but it seems difficult to predict what will happen. More than ever, in fact, Pakistan is a key in a geopolitical game with multiple players.

The United States needs a political solution to the Afghan war – so an agreement with some Taliban which will be difficult to reach without the support of the Pakistani intelligence (which today protects Mullah Omar in relation to such negotiations). But the definition of a “good” Taliban is not necessarily the same for the US and Pakistan. In Islamabad, a “good” Taliban should only fight in Afghanistan and does not challenge the Pakistani state – but the most pressing problem for Washington is specifically the movements that target NATO forces...

In Islamabad, there is no question of accepting a government in Kabul which has good relations with New Delhi – but India has become more active in Afghanistan. This precipitated the current crisis; it may well be that the Pakistani authorities felt that negotiations were being engaged in behind their back in Afghanistan, working for an agreement from which they would be excluded.

Finally, Beijing is playing its own cards, claiming to fully support Islamabad in the case of bin Laden. Some in Pakistan call for a change in alliances; in order to regain a capacity to blackmail Washington by threatening to rely more exclusively on China – the faithful friend whose weight continues to increase in Asia –, and by denouncing the imperial arrogance of the United States.

The PPP government certainly will not break with Washington without whose help it will fall – and the United States government certainly does not want make things worse. But they are not the only masters of the game

The people are notably absent from this game of chess – or bluff – played around the Pakistan-Afghanistan theatre. Yet they struggle....

These struggles are waged by the workers in brick kilns, subjected to slave-like conditions in the countryside, or textile workers in the economic centre of Faisalabad. They are the work of farmers of Punjab and Sindhi fishermen fighting the military. They are women resisting daily longstanding patriarchal oppression or the recent rise of religious fundamentalism. They are progressives in all walks of trying to defend democratic freedoms and human rights...

These fights are rarely at the top of the international agenda. They are no less important. After dealing with Pakistan, “theatre of war” we should mark them with an article which could be titled “Pakistan, the scene of battles.”

[1] Capital of Pakistan.

[2] Geronimo: Born June 16, 1829, he died in custody February 17, 1909. An Apache warrior, named at birth GB Hla Yeh (one who yawns), he fought Mexico and the United States. The White House gave Osama bin Laden the code name of Geronimo, a truly striking choice that showed terrible contempt for a leading figure in Native American resistance to European occupation of North America – making a tribute that was both involuntary and undeserved to bin Laden.

[3] Afpak: acronym to refer to Afghanistan and Pakistan, included in the same theatre of war.

[4] ISI: Inter-Services Intelligence – the largest and most powerful of the three branches of the intelligence services in Pakistan. Formally dependent, it is a state within a state.

[5] The capital of Afghanistan.

[6] An Islamic religious revivalist movement founded in India towards the end of the 19th century.

[7] I emphasize this point. The meaning of "Sharia" is very vague and open to various interpretations. For many Muslims, it is a spiritual concept, a guide to personal behaviour, not a rigid legal code. It influenced variously juridical codes depending on the countries and religious schools. Islamic law is varied and is not set in stone. What is often seen as the application of Sharia law is really about very reactionary interpretations of Islamic law.

[8] Strauss-Kahn has had to resign since this article was written.