

# ISAS Brief

No. 254 – 22 October 2012

469A Bukit Timah Road  
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770  
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239  
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447  
Email: [isassecc@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isassecc@nus.edu.sg)  
Website: [www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)



## A Wake-Up Call for Pakistan

Shahid Javed Burki<sup>1</sup>

Pakistani women are being targeted by Islamic terrorists who fear that women's emancipation would ultimately reduce their influence over a society that has become increasingly conservative. It appears that the possible rise of women will not go unchallenged, particularly in the country's more conservative areas such as the tribal belt on the border with Afghanistan.

Just when women in Pakistan have begun to use education to improve their economic and social conditions, they have run into another obstacle: the obstinate resistance offered by Islamic extremists<sup>2</sup>. The attempted killing of Malala Yousafzai is part of a pattern that has begun to evolve – to harass young women who are ready to express their right to receive education. A grim reminder of this came in the case of Farida Afridi, 25, who was killed on 8 July 2012 as she was walking from her parents' home to her office. She along with her sister had co-founded a non-governmental organisation to work for improving women's situation in the socially backward areas in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. Women working at SAWERA (the acronym stands for morning in Urdu), or Society for Appraisal and Women Empowerment in the Rural Areas, were "accused of not observing cultural norms – not

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<sup>1</sup> Mr Shahid Javed Burki is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at [sjburki@yahoo.com](mailto:sjburki@yahoo.com). The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ISAS. During a professional career spanning over half a century, Mr Burki has held a number of senior positions in Pakistan and at the World Bank. He was the Director of China Operations at the World Bank from 1987 to 1994 and the Vice President of Latin America and the Caribbean Region at the World Bank from 1994 to 1999. On leave of absence from the Bank he was Pakistan's Finance Minister, 1996-97.

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of how Pakistani women are using education to make economic advances see Shahid Javed Burki, 'Women's Quiet Revolution in Pakistan', ISAS Insights No. 173, 6 July, 2012.

wearing veils, encouraging other women to work outside the home and working alongside male colleagues”<sup>3</sup>.

Another attack came three months later in Mingora, Swat, when a gunman stopped a school bus, fired at the girls on their way to school, and seriously injured 14-year-old Malala Yousafzai. This was not a random attack but a targeted one. Sirajuddin Ahmad, the spokesman for the Taliban in the Swat Valley, said that Ms Yousafzai became a target because she had been “brainwashed” into making anti-Taliban statements by her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai. “We warned him several times to stop his daughter from using dirty language against us, but he didn’t listen and forced us to take this extreme step”<sup>4</sup>.

The girl survived and was taken by helicopter to the military hospital in Peshawar. The surgeons removed the bullet from her head and once her condition stabilised she was taken to the Armed Forces Institute of Cardiology in Rawalpindi. On 14 October 2012, five days after she was injured, an air-ambulance provided by the government of UAE flew her off to England for the long-term care the doctors determined she needed. For the last three years Malala stood up to Islamic extremism and let her voice be heard. She was only 11 years old when she began to raise her voice against the Taliban. “Her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, who runs a school, said his daughter had defied threats for years, believing the good work she was doing for her community was her best protection...A Taliban spokesman said that [Ms] Yousafzai was targeted for trying to spread Western culture and that the group would try to kill her again if she survived.”<sup>5</sup> Four days after the attack on her, the school that she attended in Mingora, Swat’s main town, reopened and 500 tribal elders held a rally there in Ms Yousafzai’s support, shouting “Malala, we are with you.”

Ms Malala Yousafzai began speaking out after Swat – often called Pakistan’s Switzerland – had fallen to the Taliban. They took over the lush green valley that had been attracting tens of thousands tourists from all parts of Pakistan<sup>6</sup>. This place of peace and relative poverty was violated by a band of religious zealots who began to identify themselves as the *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP) as they expanded their hold over some of the areas which were close to but not part of the tribal belt. Religious seminaries located in the tribal agencies in the area bordering Afghanistan were the birth place of the original Taliban. Once in control of Swat district the TTP introduced the form of governance the Afghan Taliban had imposed on Afghanistan in 1996-2001. This included banning girls from attending schools. To ensure that

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<sup>3</sup> Michelle Langevine Leiby, “Activist’s killing reverberates in Pakistan”, *The Washington Post*, July 18, 2012, p. 11A.

<sup>4</sup> Declan Walsh, “Taliban reiterate vow to kill Pakistani girl”, *The New York Times*, 13 October, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Jibrán Ahmad, “Pakistani teen shot by Taliban is moved to hospital in army town”, *The Washington Post*, 12 October, 2012, p. A22.

<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of the sudden turn in Swat’s situation in 2009, see Iftekhár Ahmed Chowdhury, “The Sorrows of Swat and the Mayhem in the Malakand: What now?” ISAS Insights No. 66, 19 May, 2009.

their writ would run, they not only closed girls' schools but destroyed the buildings in which they were located. Ms Yousafzai gained notice in early 2009 when she wrote a diary under a pen name for the BBC's Urdu service. "Many Pakistanis view [Ms] Yousafzai, who also promoted literacy and peace, as a symbol of hope in a country long beset by violence and despair. In 2011, the Pakistani government awarded her a national peace prize and 1 million rupees (\$10,500). She also was a finalist for the International Children's Peace Prize awarded by a Dutch organisation that lauded her bravery in standing up for girls' education rights amid rising fundamentalism when few others were prepared to speak."<sup>7</sup>

In a newspaper article Laura Bush, former first lady of the United States, recalled the barbaric mindset of the Taliban regime that governed Afghanistan before it was removed by the American forces that invaded the country in the fall of 2001. The regime "was dedicated in part to the brutal repression of ...women. Women were not allowed to work or attend school. Taliban religious police patrolled the streets, beating women who might venture out alone, who were not dressed 'properly' or who dared to laugh out loud. Women could not wear shoes that made too much noise, and their fingernails were ripped out for the 'crime' of wearing nail polish". Mrs. Bush likened Ms Yousafzai's campaign against the Taliban in her native Swat to another young diarist "who inspired many around the world. From her hiding place in Amsterdam, Ann Frank wrote, 'How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world'. Today, for Malala and the many girls like her, we need not and cannot wait. We must improve the world."<sup>8</sup>

Could the attempted assassination bring the much needed political and social change in Pakistan? In an interview with CNN on 11 October 2012, Hina Rabbani Khar, Pakistan's Foreign Minister, described the attack as a traumatic "wake-up call" that could prove to be a turning point in Pakistan's war against extremism. Several newspapers in their editorials encouraged the citizens of Pakistan to turn Ms Yousafzai's travails into an opportunity to break loose from the tightening grip of Islamic extremism. "For once, and at long last, Pakistanis appear to have woken up to the consequences of the extremism that has been allowed to take root in our country", the liberal *Dawn* newspaper said in an editorial. "Which makes it all the more important to make the most of this moment of national consensus."<sup>9</sup>

To show that most of the political parties stood together in condemning this incident, Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf was echoed by the leaders of the *Jamaat-e-Islami*, the country's largest Islamic party. Several religious leaders joined the chorus of condemnation that followed the attack on Ms Yousafzai. In a sign of unity, in the eastern city of Lahore, a council of Sunni Muslim scholars issued a fatwa signed by 50 clerics saying that the

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Leiby and Michelle Langevine Leiby, "Pakistan Taliban shoots, wounds girl", *The Washington Post*, 10 October, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Laura Bush, "Why Malala inspires us: We owe it to her to refuse to look the other way", *The Washington Post*, 11 October, 2012, p. A19.

<sup>9</sup> *Dawn*, editorial, 12 October 2012.

justifications cited by the girl's attackers were "deviant" and had no basis in Islamic law. But some influential religious leaders sought to link the attack with the policies pursued by the United States in hunting and killing the extremists in Pakistan. Maulana Fazlur Rahman, the leader of his own faction of the politically powerful party *Jamiat Ulemai Islam*, while condemning the brutal attack, said the attack was due to the wrong policies of the government. His position was echoed by some prayer leaders in Islamabad. One sermon given in a mosque in the capital city: "Those who are calling for condemnation are themselves the killer. Can they stop the bombing of innocent children, women and mosques?"<sup>10</sup> Imran Khan, a rising political star in Pakistan, hinted in a TV interview that some of the leaders had not condemned the heinous attack because of fear. After all, the extremists had shown their ability to strike at those they considered "deviants". Salmaan Taseer, Governor of Punjab, was gunned down by one of his own guards for having spoken on behalf of a Christian woman condemned to death by a court for having been critical of Islam and its Prophet. "The message has been clear for some time" wrote Farahnaz Isphani, for *The Daily Beast*. She is a member of the National Assembly and a prominent leader of the governing Pakistan People's Party. "Do not criticise the military or the militants. Minorities in our society have become the 'other' – less human and almost untouchable. There have been systematic eliminations of the Ahmadiyas, of Shia Muslims, of Christians, and many moderate and liberal voices."<sup>11</sup> She appealed for a concerted move to stem the tide of extremism in the country.

The fact that Ms Yousafzai is likely to survive will be a constant reminder to Pakistan's citizens about the dangers they face and what needs to be done to bring the country on the path it was on before the rise of extremism. Had she died in the attack, she would have been forgotten after a while, a victim among many claimed by the extremists' violent campaign. In life she will remain a symbol – a wake-up call.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Leiby, "A chorus of condemnation", *The Washington Post*, 13 October, 2012, p. A8.

<sup>11</sup> Farahnaz Isphani, "After Malala Yousafzai shooting, can shock therapy free Pakistan", *The Daily Beast*, 12 October, 2012.