

# ISAS Brief

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## Pakistan's New Taliban Challenge

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### Abstract

*The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has a new line-up of leaders in place, filling the gap created by the killing of the old leadership in an American drone attack. This shift will have major consequences for Pakistan, including in regard to the difficulties with the peace process that has been sanctioned by an All Parties Conference and is being pursued by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The TTP leadership change is taking place when the Pakistan Army is about to induct a new chief who will replace General Ashfaq Kayani and as the pace of American withdrawal from Afghanistan picks up. This paper examines the significance of a new group taking over the command of the TTP.*

### Pakistani Taliban has a New Leader

On 7 November 2013, the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) announced the appointment of Mullah Fazlullah as its Emir (chief), a position that had become vacant as a result of the death

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on 1 November of Hakimullah Mehsud in an American drone attack. The announcement was made by Shahidullah Shahid, the TTP spokesman, who said that the decision was taken by the group's 17-member governing council. The council met at an undisclosed location in North Waziristan tribal agency and deliberated for six days. Fazlullah will have full operational and tactical responsibility for the group. According to Declan Walsh of *The New York Times*, the Taliban also appointed Khalid Haqqani, "a little-known commander from a rural district near Peshawar, as the deputy commander, effectively signaling a shift in the Taliban leadership from the tribal belt to neighboring Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province". A former security official speculated that "Fazlullah had been chosen to avert a rift between rival Mehsud factions inside the Taliban".<sup>2</sup> These appointments are significant for several reasons.

Fazlullah will be the first leader of TTP who does not hail from Waziristan's Mehsud tribe. The first two leaders – Baitullah Mehsud and Hakimullah Mehsud – belonged to a feared tribe. Both were killed by drone strikes ordered by the Americans. The new leader belongs to Swat district which is a "settled district" in the province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. Districts are regarded as settled if the laws of Pakistan apply to them, which is not the case with the tribal agencies. Fazlullah grew up in Mingora, the district's main city, and gained reputation for extreme ruthlessness. By choosing a person who no longer resides in Pakistan but has created a safe-haven in Afghanistan for himself and his followers, the Taliban are perhaps looking at their situation after December 2014 when the United States completes the withdrawal of its combat troops from Afghanistan. It is interesting that the second position also went to an outsider.

The second significance of the TTP's appointment of Fazlullah is that the group is turning for leadership to a militant who is not in favour of negotiating peace with the Pakistani state. In choosing a figure, who some analysts describe as Pakistan's most feared man, the TTP was sending a signal that shook Islamabad. As outlined by TTP spokesman Shahid, "the Taliban's goal was to signal that its insurgency against the government will continue, despite Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's efforts to engage the group in peace talks".<sup>3</sup>

It is also significant – the third reason for the worry in Pakistan – that Fazlullah has picked on the security forces as his preferred targets. In many public statements he has made it clear that he regards the Pakistan Army as the real enemy. He often cites many instances of why the army in Pakistan should be the main focus of Taliban's operations. These include not only the army's operation in Swat but also the fact that in 2007 the-then President, Pervez Musharraf, had ordered the army commandos to clear the Lal Masjid in Islamabad of the militants who had taken residence in that institution.

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<sup>2</sup> Declan Walsh, "Pakistani Taliban pick hard-liner as leader, imperiling proposed peace talks", *The New York Times*, 8 November, 2013, p. A4.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Craig and Haq Nawaz Khan, "Pakistani Taliban appoints feared commander as leader", *The Washington Post*, 8 November 2013, p. A10.

## New Leader's Background

Soon after the fall of the Taliban regime in Kabul, Fazlullah led a group of thousands of young men from Swat to fight the Americans. He returned to Swat in 2002 after losing hundreds of his followers. Back in his home district he helped build a *madrassa* or religious school and launched a radio station to broadcast his messages and collect donations. The use of this medium of communication earned him the name of 'Mullah Radio'.

In his radio sermons he picked up the message of Sufi Muhammad, the founder of *Tanzim Nifaz Shariat-i-Mohammadi* (Organisation for the Enforcement of Mohammad's Laws), became Sufi's devoted follower and married his daughter. In 2007 he merged his organisation with the TTP thus extending the latter's reach beyond the Waziristan tribal agencies. In 2009 he invited the TTP into Swat and took over most of the district, briefly enforcing the Islamic law in the area. While in virtual control of Swat, Fazlullah showed what his father-in-law's organisation intended and what it considered to be Prophet Mohammad's laws. Fazlullah banned the education of women; music and any other form of entertainment; enforced quick justice, using such punishments as the cutting of the hands of those accused of theft and stoning of adulterers; and strict dress codes for men and women. Fazlullah's brief success created a deep sense of anxiety not only in Pakistan but also in the West. Hillary Clinton, then the United States Secretary of State, said that the take-over of Swat meant that Pakistan was faced with an "existential threat".

Islamabad decided to act. The government headed by the-then President, Asif Ali Zardari, ordered the army to clear Swat district of all militants. This was done relatively quickly. However, Fazlullah and his men escaped into eastern Afghanistan and created a sanctuary for themselves in that area of the neighbouring country. It was from there that the militant ordered the execution of Malala Yusufzai, the teenager-girl from Swat who had spoken out against Taliban's attempts to prevent girls from going to school. The girl was seriously hurt but she survived and has gone on to spread her message from Britain where she was treated and where she took asylum. In early-October 2013, Fazlullah asserted responsibility for killing a 2-star general of the Pakistan Army and two other personnel in a roadside bombing near the border with Afghanistan.

## Signals from the New Taliban Leader

Prime Minister Sharif's focus on first negotiating with the Taliban before using force, if necessary, to bring them under the state's control has puzzled several analysts. According to *The Economist*, "Mr. Sharif's people insist that the prime minister is all too aware of the futility of talks. (Not least of the challenges, the TTP is a loose alliance of around 30, often bickering groups.) But, they say, Mr. Sharif has to show that he has exhausted all the peaceful options before he can take on the jihadists with force".<sup>4</sup> However, Sharif may not have to

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<sup>4</sup> *The Economist*, "Pakistan's militants: Bee sting", 9 November, 2013, p. 45.

follow this strategy. With the TTP under a new leadership, Islamabad cannot expect to negotiate a settlement with the dissident elements. Mullah Fazlullah has a record of entering into deals with the authorities to buy time to consolidate his own position. This is what he did in Swat when he entered into two arrangements with the government but reneged once he thought that he was in an advantageous position to impose his will on the citizenry.

Among Pakistan's political leadership, the person who is likely to be most affected is Imran Khan whose party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), leads the government in the province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. The settled part of the province has now become the area from which the new TTP leadership has emerged. This will pose a problem for the PTI which, under Khan's leadership, has been a strong proponent of negotiations with the Taliban.

Another question concerns the posture the Pakistan Army is likely to adopt under the new commander to be appointed by the civilian leadership to replace General Kayani who will complete his two terms in office by the end of November 2013. All in all, the death of Hakimullah Mehsud and his replacement by Mullah Fazlullah may prove to be a game-changer in addressing Pakistan's Taliban problem.

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