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Struggle for the Soul of Pakistan

Sixty years after its founding as a homeland for India's Muslims, Pakistan straddles the fault line between moderate and militant Islam. Its dilemma is a cautionary tail for the post-9/11 world.

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If there is an address, an exact location for the rift tearing Pakistan apart, and possibly the world, it is a spot 17 miles (28 kilometers) west of Islamabad called the Margalla Pass. Here, at a limestone cliff in the middle of Pakistan, the mountainous west meets the Indus River Valley, and two ancient, and very different, civilizations collide. To the southeast, unfurled to the horizon, lie the fertile lowlands of the Indian subcontinent, realm of peasant farmers on steamy plots of land, bright with colors and the splash of serendipitous gods. To the west and north stretch the harsh, windswept mountains of Central Asia, land of herders and raiders on horseback, where man fears one God and takes no prisoners.

This is also where two conflicting forms of Islam meet: the relatively relaxed and tolerant Islam of India, versus the rigid fundamentalism of the Afghan frontier. Beneath the surface of Pakistan, these opposing forces grind against each other like two vast geologic plates, rattling teacups from Lahore to London, Karachi to New York. The clash between moderates and extremists in Pakistan today reflects this rift, and can be seen as a microcosm for a larger struggle among Muslims everywhere. So when the earth trembles in Pakistan, the world pays attention.

Travel 8,000 miles (13,000 kilometers) across this troubled country, as I did recently, and it becomes obvious that, 60 years after its founding, Pakistan still occupies unsettled ground. Traumatized by multiple wars with India, a parade of military strongmen (including the current president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf), and infighting among ethnic groups—Punjabi, Sindhi, Baluchi, Pashtun—Pakistan's 165 million people have never fully united as one nation, despite being 97 percent Muslim. To hold the country together, successive governments have spent billions on the military, creating a pampered and self-serving monolith of mostly Punjabi generals while neglecting the basic needs of the people, for justice, health, education, security, and hope. Lately, these grievances have spilled onto the streets, as lawyers and other opponents challenge Pakistan's military government and demand a return to civilian, democratic rule. Meanwhile, six years after 9/11, the forces of Islamic radicalism are gaining strength and challenging Pakistan's moderate majority for the soul of the country.

It's not just the surging homegrown Taliban, which in one two-week period this year scorched and bloodied the streets of half a dozen cities with suicide bombs. Or the al Qaeda fighters who prowl the western mountains of Waziristan, butchering anyone suspected of being an American spy. Just as chilling are the "night letters" posted on public buildings, warning that all girls, upon threat of death, must wear head-to-toe burkas and stop attending school. Or, in a rising tide of intimidation, the murders of teachers and doctors and human rights workers accused of "crimes against Islam." But perhaps the most telling evidence of all was my encounter with a 22-year-old woman named Umme Ayman, who seemed all too eager to die.

I cannot see her face, or even her eyes, but I can tell you that Ayman is an impressive young woman. She wears glasses under a black veil and speaks in short, eruptive bursts of English that sound like well-rehearsed lines in a school play. She and a group of 200 female religious students have taken over a public children's library in Islamabad. They are protesting the destruction of mosques run by radical clerics that the government says were built without permits. Riot police, bristling with sidearms and batons, have encircled the library and ordered the students to leave. But Ayman is in no mood to listen.

"We are not terrorists," she says. "We are students. We wish to spread Islam over all the world. If America wants to end Islam, then we are prepared to die defending our faith. We have said our goodbyes." Ayman and the other women sit around the library's circular tables in tiny chairs meant for children. Amid shelves lined with children's storybooks, they have posted signs reading "Allah is for Muslims, not infidels." Across the street, their parents have been holding an anxious vigil for weeks.

"Our fate is with Allah," Ayman says, as other protesters gather around, "but if the government grants our demands, there will be no problem." And what are

those demands? "To rebuild the mosques and to make Pakistan an Islamic state." Half a dozen veiled heads bob in agreement.

From the start, the founders of Pakistan intended their nation to be a refuge for Muslims, not an Islamic state. Pakistan was created when India, a British colony for nearly a hundred years, gained its independence and was partitioned into two countries along a hastily drawn border. Pakistan's first leader, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, and his brain trust of secular intellectuals created a fledgling democracy that gave Islam a cultural, rather than political, role in national life. Their Pakistan was to be a model of how Islam, merged with democratic ideals, could embrace the modern world. "Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense," Jinnah said in his inaugural address, but "as citizens of the state."

Sixty years later, having been educated in schools that teach mainly the Koran, the young women in the library are stunned when I mention Jinnah's secular vision for Pakistan. "That is a lie," Ayman says, her voice shaking with fury. "Everyone knows Pakistan was created as an Islamic state, according to the will of Allah. Where did you read this thing?" Such is the certainty of Pakistan's Islamists, whose loud assertions give them political influence far beyond their numbers.

The women may be on the front lines of this protest, but it's clear the clerics in the mosque next door are calling the shots. The children's library is a few yards from one of the most radical mosques in Pakistan, Lal Masjid, or Red Mosque, which has posted dozens of lean young jihadists in black turbans around the library, brandishing swords, staffs, axes, and AK-47s. The men from the mosque include pro-Taliban clerics and Javed Ibrahim Paracha, a bearded, heavyset former member of parliament who has been dubbed "al Qaeda's lawyer" for successfully representing several hundred jihadists captured in Pakistan after 9/11. He explains what emboldens these young women to risk their lives for Islam: "This government has lost all credibility," he says. "People look at Musharraf and they see a U.S. puppet who's willing to declare war on fellow Muslims to satisfy America. They also see his generals getting rich, while they're getting poorer every day. People are losing hope. Pakistan and its government are becoming two different things. This will have to change, and soon."

A week later, the standoff comes to an apparent end after the government backs down and agrees to start rebuilding the mosques. The children's library is stripped of all books deemed un-Islamic, and the students take over. In the capital, a mere ten minutes' drive from the presidential palace, the Islamists have won. (Months later, as this story goes to press, the government finally stormed the Red Mosque and killed scores of militants. Umme Ayman survived.)

More than anyone, it was General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq who created Pakistan's current generation of Islamic radicals, and the climate in which they thrive. A Punjabi general with a pencil-thin mustache and raccoon circles under his eyes, Zia seized power in a coup in 1977, had the democratically elected prime minister tried and hanged, and promptly pressed for the Islamization of Pakistan, calling for more religion in the classroom and the use of punishments such as flogging and amputations for crimes against Islam. To Zia, Pakistan's secular founders, with their emphasis on Muslim culture, had it exactly backward. "We were *created* on the basis of Islam," Zia said, and he set out to remake democratic Pakistan as a strict Islamic state—despite the fact that a large majority of Pakistanis were, and remain, moderates.

Whether by temperament or tradition, most Pakistani Muslims are more comfortable with the mystical and ecstatic rituals of Barelvi Islam, a colorful blend of Indian Islamic practice and Sufism. For a Punjabi farmer whose crop has just come in, it has always been more satisfying to hang out at a Sufi shrine listening to *qawwali* music and watching dervishes whirl than reciting the Koran in a fundamentalist mosque. Most Pakistanis, though powerless to resist, were lukewarm to Zia's Islamization program, as was much of the outside world.

That all changed in December 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded neighboring Afghanistan, driving hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees—mainly conservative Pashtun tribesmen—across the border into Pakistan. Within months Zia's Islamist dream got a huge boost: The United States and Saudi Arabia joined Pakistan in a covert alliance to supply arms, training, and billions of dollars to an anti-Soviet insurgency in Afghanistan. The motto of Zia's army—Jihad in the Service of Allah—became a rallying cry for thousands of mujahideen training in camps funded by the CIA in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province. Over time, Zia's agenda, and that of the United States, became indistinguishable: If Zia wanted to Islamize Pakistan while mobilizing support for the anti-Soviet jihad, all the more power to him. Besides, the fundamentalist madrassas of northwestern Pakistan made excellent recruiting centers for mujahideen—young fighters who saw the struggle against the Soviets as a holy war.

During the 1980s, as the mujahideen prevailed against the Soviets in Afghanistan, the winds of extremism blowing from the northwest began to chill all of Pakistan. Millions of dollars from Saudi Arabia flowed into the hard-line Sunni madrassas clustered along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan, which eventually spread across Pakistan. Not all Pakistani madrassas today are fundamentalist or radical. Some are shoestring operations run by moderate clerics to meet the educational needs of the poor. But the majority—more than 60 percent—are affiliated with the fundamentalist Deobandi sect, an austere interpretation of Islam that calls for a rejection of modernity and a return to the "pure," seventh-century Islam of the Prophet Muhammad. Politically savvy

and extremely well funded, more than 10,000 of these schools operate across Pakistan today, compared with fewer than 1,000 before General Zia took power. Thousands more operate unofficially.

By the time Zia died in a mysterious 1988 plane crash, the Islamization of Pakistan was well under way. The following year, the Soviet Union, preoccupied with its own implosion, pulled its demoralized troops from Afghanistan. The U.S. promptly declared victory and returned home, leaving the Afghan people to the chaotic rule of the mujahideen warlords. One crucial chapter in the story of radical Islam's ascendancy had come to a close. The one we are still living had just begun. Osama bin Laden and other leaders of the Afghan jihad now moved freely in and out of northwestern Pakistan and its Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The madrassas swelled with the children of the Zia Generation. In the rugged mountainous land shared by Afghanistan and Pakistan, the seeds of the Taliban, and al Qaeda, had been sown.

"Yes, there are extremists here," says Pakistani novelist Mohsin Hamid. "But they are a small minority in a nation of 165 million people. Most of us want nothing to do with violence." This is true. But like moderates everywhere, those in Pakistan have a hard time being heard over the racket rising up from their streets and television sets, a raucous soundtrack of religious sermonizing, Indo-Pakistani saber rattling, and a general gnashing of teeth that passes for public discourse. Ordinary people are also stifled by a government and police force that are among the most corrupt in the world, led by an army that answers to no one. But it is a measure of the country's underlying goodness, and a sign of hope, that 60 years after independence the most revered figure in Pakistan is not a mullah or a sports hero, but a 79-year-old man who routinely washes dried blood off dead bodies and fishes his clothes from a donation barrel.

Abdul Sattar Edhi began serving his fellow citizens a few years after the founding of Pakistan, when he opened a free clinic in Karachi. Later he bought a dented Hillman station wagon, its blue paint peeling, and turned it into Pakistan's first private ambulance. He shuttled poor people to medical care and collected the bodies of the city's homeless from the gutters, washed them, and gave them a proper burial. "I felt it was my duty as a human being," he says, recalling the revulsion he learned to overcome. "It was obvious the government wasn't going to do it."

Decades later, that hasn't changed. While the military accounts for a quarter of the national budget, less than 3 percent is spent on education, health, and public welfare. And so Edhi still tends to Pakistan's dirty work, body by body. His one-man charity is now an acclaimed international foundation. His single, beat-up old station wagon has grown into a fleet of 1,380 little white ambulances positioned across Pakistan, tended by thousands of volunteers. They are usually first to arrive on the scene of any tragedy. In May 2002, when police found the remains of Daniel Pearl, the Wall Street Journal reporter murdered in Karachi, it was Edhi who gently collected the body parts, all ten, and took Daniel Pearl to the morgue.

Edhi was born in the Indian town of Bantva, 250 miles (400 kilometers) from Mumbai. As a teenager, he'd gone with his father to hear Jinnah, the tall, gaunt, visionary founder of Pakistan, deliver a speech urging local Muslims to join him in the new country. At first his father hesitated. But during partition, when Hindu mobs began marauding nearby, the family joined the more than 14 million people from both countries—Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs—who fled their homes and crossed to the other side of the line. As many as a million people died in sectarian riots, massacres, and killings along the way.

Edhi's family came by ship, landing on September 6, 1947, three weeks after Pakistan came into being, amid throngs of people shouting "*Pakistan zindabad*—long live Pakistan!" Within an hour, as he walked the streets of his new home, he saw a Hindu man murdered by a mob of young Muslim boys. "They stabbed him over and over with a knife, and I'll never forget watching him writhe in pain on the ground. All over Karachi, Hindus were packing up and running away, exactly as we'd done in India. Just like that, our joy turned to horror and shame. That's what I remember about partition."

Edhi's adopted city of Karachi has grown from a population of 450,000 in 1947 to a surging metropolis of more than 15 million people. It may be the most cosmopolitan of Pakistan's cities, but it is among the most dangerous as well—a place where Pakistan's widening gap between rich and poor is on full display. Karachi is a sprawling universe of ramshackle neighborhoods that radiate north, west, and east from the glitzy seaside hotels, office towers, and diplomatic fortresses downtown, where car bombs are an occupational hazard and personal security a billion-dollar-a-year business. Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups are known to operate in the squalid "no go" neighborhoods of Karachi, beyond the reach of police and perhaps even Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan's powerful military intelligence agency.

In the middle of all this sits Edhi, a dignified man wearing a gray *shalwar kameez* (Pakistan's national dress) and a furry black cap in the style Jinnah wore—a fitting touch in a man who describes himself as a "super patriot." In a neighborhood of litter-strewn streets, Edhi's headquarters is a cluttered office that adjoins the two small rooms where he lives with his wife, Bilquis, his partner in the foundation. Edhi's operation relies on donations; he refuses to accept government money or even a ride in someone else's car. He travels by ambulance, in case someone needs help along the way. Outside Edhi's office, a metal crib is stationed on the stairway beneath a sign reading, "Don't Kill Your Baby." Every Edhi Foundation office in the country has such a crib, where a mother

can leave an unwanted baby, no questions asked. Edhi's Karachi office alone receives 90 babies a month, half of them alive.

Today a young nurse in a head scarf brings in a newborn left in the crib overnight, a girl wrapped in a soft floral blanket, perhaps four days old, her arms and legs shrunken and disfigured. The nurse places her on Edhi's desk, like a gift. He picks up the infant and gently strokes her malformed hands with his finger, whispering to her in Gujarati, his native language, his long gray beard tickling her nose. As this little girl grows, she'll be given medical care in one of the foundation's clinics, sheltered in its orphanage, educated in one of its schools, and sent forth into a carefully arranged marriage with job skills and a dowry. Edhi has given away hundreds of brides at the foundation's wedding facility, a cross between a Bollywood set and the Elvis Suite at a Las Vegas hotel, with a bed in the shape of a heart. A bulletin board in the lobby is filled with dozens of wedding pictures, each happy bride a miracle child plucked from Edhi's rescue cradle.

Despite his selfless deeds, Edhi is often attacked as "un-Islamic" by Pakistan's hard-line mullahs, who cite his policy on infidels. He has none. Edhi never asks whether an abandoned child, a psychiatric patient, a dead person, or a battered woman is Sunni or Shiite, Hindu or Christian—or, for that matter, Punjabi or Sindhi, Baluchi or Pashtun, Mohajir or Kashmiri. "I'm a Muslim," says Edhi, "but my true religion is human rights."

In modern Pakistan, that's an increasingly lonely position. There are many thousands of dedicated doctors, lawyers, teachers, social workers, and humanitarians—including some in government—who, like Edhi, are working to move their country forward, but the space in which they operate is shrinking. Recently, at Musharraf's bidding, parliament passed a bill to restrict the activities of NGOs and human rights groups. Even as he promotes "enlightened moderation," Musharraf accuses such groups of humiliating Pakistan by publicizing abuses, and declares them a threat to the national interest.

Such rhetoric only emboldens the Islamists, whose influence is growing across Pakistan. Edhi gets half a dozen death threats a week, ranging from crank calls to serious warnings that made him temporarily flee the country. Religious militants harass his offices—a campaign orchestrated, Edhi believes, by Pakistan's Islamist political parties, which compete with him for financial support. A few years ago, a new Edhi Foundation hospital, which cost three million dollars to build, was taken over by students from a radical madrassa north of Karachi. Intimidated by the mullahs, the police refused to act on Edhi's complaint, and his hospital is now a dormitory, with student laundry—black turbans favored by the Taliban—flapping from the windows, like flags over conquered territory.

Highways in Pakistan are a kind of national theater, in which throngs of people, nearly all men, hunker down on the roadside like spectators at a cockfight, keenly observing all that passes with an air of amused expectation. Stop along the roadway for a cup of tea, and you hear things. You hear people talk about chronic injustice. They tell stories of people losing their land, their lives, their honor, with no recourse. It is easy to think they exaggerate. And then you meet someone else who changes your mind.

A girl called Najma, who is 16, speaks in a cautious monotone, and it is difficult to know, after what happened, whether she will ever speak naturally again. She still wears the delicate ring in her nose that signifies her virginity. On this day she also wears a pink head scarf wrapped around her face, pretty and round with high cheekbones and wide-set eyes, though now they are dull and without expression, like a captive. She sits next to her mother on the bed where the incident occurred and tries to talk without crying.

Two weeks ago, at one in the morning, five men, maybe six, burst through the door of the family's mud-brick home, which sits on a tiny plot of land in the village of Nizampur in southern Punjab. They identified themselves as police and said they were searching for weapons. One held a pistol to her mother's chest while another pinned her nine-year-old brother, Rizwan, to the floor. And then two men held Najma down on the bed while a third raped her.

The leader masked his face with a scarf, her mother says, but she recognized the raspy voice of their neighbor, a police constable, who lives 200 yards (180 meters) away and wants the plot of wheat that Najma's family moved here to farm as tenants 40 years ago. According to the complaint Najma's father filed with the police, the attack resulted from his refusal to vacate the land. After the rape, the men spent a few minutes ransacking the house. As they left, they delivered a warning: Leave this place, or we'll be back for your other daughter.

Rashid Rehman is a veteran human rights lawyer who volunteered to represent Najma for the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. Rape is epidemic in parts of the country, Rehman says, where it is used as a barbaric instrument of tribal justice; a village might punish a husband's adultery, for example, by gang-raping his wife. Najma's case is typical in southern Punjab, he says, where the British rewarded their local allies with grants of land and autonomy; after partition, these feudal landlords became a law unto themselves. In their world, rape is a tool of intimidation wielded by powerful, politically connected landowners to terrorize peasants, to scare them off their land. If a family doesn't comply, Rehman says, they are often killed. "Who's going to stop them?" he asks.

In this case, he says, the family did everything right. They went to the police the next morning and sought medical help for Najma. She was examined by a doctor, who submitted a medical report confirming the rape. But the local police, who are of the same clan as the constable, refused to file charges. Incensed, Rehman appealed to officials in the nearby town of Khanewal.

Najma shows great dignity for a brutalized teenager. Today, as Rehman heads off to hear the outcome of the appeal, she asks for one last word. "I don't know what my life will be in the future," she tells him quietly, "but I'm ready to face my attackers in public and demand justice for what they did." Of the rapist, she says, "He must be hanged. He must."

At the police station in Khanewal, Rehman meets first with the acting superintendent, a stocky man in aviator glasses with a black baton in his hand and a portrait of Jinnah hanging behind his desk. As Rehman briefs him, the superintendent glances nervously at the six large men in plainclothes, intelligence types, who sit against the far wall, sipping tea. The superintendent takes a few notes, makes a phone call, hangs up. He turns his baton over and over. Finally, the phone rings. Long conversation. He hangs up and says that the forensic evidence in Najma's case has been, unfortunately, misplaced. Rehman asks to see the supervisor.

The afternoon light fades from gold to gray as Rehman waits in another empty office. The electricity is out—yet another rolling blackout. Finally, the police inspector, a Mr. Khan, arrives and pulls up a battered chair. Wearing a shalwar kameez the color of old mustard, Khan is a rangy, loose-limbed speed-talker with a cigarette-scorched voice. He has studied Najma's case in detail, he says, and he's sure what he's about to say will please Rehman, since it will resolve the legal issues once and for all. He pauses, as if waiting for a drumroll.

Najma is lying, he announces, to protect her father from a previous charge of having assaulted the police constable. (Her father is a small, defeated man pushing 70, who can barely walk.) The medical evidence, Khan continues, reveals Najma to be a "habitual fornicator," based on certain measurements he is not at liberty to divulge. To conduct his investigation, he says, he personally traveled to the village and interviewed "60 or 90 people in the village mosque." All declared the police constable incapable of committing such a crime. The case, he says, is closed. It is dark by the time Rehman pulls away from the police station, musing on what will happen to Najma's family. "If they don't leave immediately, they will be in danger," he says. "The constable could send men to rape the other sister, or to rape Najma again. Or he might kill them all, to make an example of them or to punish them for going to the police."

It was a similar lawlessness that drove the people of Afghanistan into the arms of the Taliban in the mid-1990s. The country was then in the midst of a civil war and run by warlords, who grew rich on the opium trade, terrorized the countryside, and seized the lands and daughters of any poor farmer they chose. One day near Kandahar, a mullah and former mujahideen commander named Mohammad Omar said enough was enough. With the Koran in one hand and a Kalashnikov in the other, he rallied his students, or taliban, and launched a new jihad: to cleanse Afghanistan of lawlessness and corruption. Backed by Pakistan, the Taliban triumphed in 1996, took Kabul, and imposed their own extreme vision of Islamic law. Ordinary Afghans, at first, regarded the Taliban's dictates as a small price to pay for an end to civil war.

Rashid Rehman hears stories such as Najma's and fears what lies ahead for Pakistan. In the car on his way back to his office in the Punjabi city of Multan, he sits in the dark, looking out the window at the feeble lights of passing villages. When he speaks, he is calm and clear. "When government fails them, people get angry," he says. "They lose faith in the system and look for alternatives. Think how easy it would be for the Islamists—or Taliban or al Qaeda—to go to the brothers of this girl now and say, 'What happened to your family is not justice. This man dishonored your sister, he dishonored your father and your family name. Join us and we will help you get justice. We will make him pay.' When citizens are denied their basic human rights, they become radicalized. When people are powerless, they are easily manipulated. This is what worries me the most."

My new friends want to know why Americans think they are terrorists. It's a good question, and an innocent one, judging by the young and open faces of the dozen or so students sharing their evening meal with me. They don't look like terrorists as they sit in a semicircle on green mats in the courtyard of Jamia Uloom-ul-Quran, a small Deobandi madrassa located in a historic downtown mosque in Peshawar. This provincial capital served as headquarters for the Afghan resistance against the Soviets, and jihad is still a going concern here. A block away from the madrassa, at shops selling shoes and used clothes, I'd bought a 50-cent al Qaeda DVD of a suicide bomber preparing for a mission. At the end of the disc, over religious music, the bomber is shown in his car at a distant crossroads, blowing up a convoy. "We know that shop," the students say. "But we're not terrorists."

A few of the students appear to be ten or younger, but most are in their late teens or early 20s. They say their dream for Pakistan is "a peaceful nation, in which justice prevails, in keeping with Islamic law." But they believe, as many here do, that Islam is under attack. By America, by the West, by India, by their own government. Under these circumstances, they say, jihad is justified. What about suicide bombing? Is it sanctioned by Islam? "You must think we have

classes here in making bombs or AK-47s!" exclaims one boy, and they all laugh.

"In any Muslim land that's occupied, suicide bombing is allowed," says a personable older boy named Rafiullah, who has bright brown eyes and the beginnings of a beard. A few mention Iraq and Palestine as places where such bombings are justified. Another boy mentions Afghanistan. "But it's not allowed in Pakistan," Rafiullah says, "since we're not an occupied country." ("Not yet!" somebody else interjects, to laughter.) "Nobody has a right to blow you up, even if you're a non-Muslim, or an infidel. If you are here as a guest, you are welcome." He reaches to shake my hand, as if to reassure me.

The call for jihad is rising across Pakistan, but it is here, in the northwest, that the Islamists are taking control. Ever since 9/11, thousands of Taliban fighters have found refuge among their fellow Pashtun tribesmen in Peshawar, Quetta, and the mountainous tribal areas along the Afghan border, especially North and South Waziristan. A year ago this month, the government agreed to a cease-fire with the tribes and abandoned most of North Waziristan to the militants. It's a sign of the local Taliban's strength that the agreement was signed not by tribal elders but by Taliban commanders.

Pakistan's turnabout on the Taliban, which it had strongly supported since 1994, came shortly after 9/11. When Afghanistan's Taliban government, which had sheltered Osama bin Laden, disintegrated under the firestorm meted out by the United States and its coalition partners, President Musharraf confronted a stark choice: Cooperate or suffer the consequences. He immediately sided with the U.S. against the Taliban. It was not a popular decision. Today, Pakistan is under pressure to contain the Taliban and al Qaeda to the tribal areas along the Afghan border, although it's clear that they're gaining in other parts of Pakistan. Many Deobandi madrassas are believed to have an al Qaeda recruiter on the premises. But Muhammad Hanif Jalandhry, who runs a madrassa in Multan, says the reputation of Pakistan's madrassas as factories for terrorists is "propaganda. I tell you, it's the oppressive system we live under that's bringing people to these seminaries. People are seeking refuge and security—and dignity. They are seeking a future."

About a third of the students at the Deobandi madrassa in Peshawar, for instance, are poor kids from far-flung regions of the North-West Frontier Province or the tribal areas. They are like Mir Rahman, 16, a sweet-faced boy from a family of poor herders in the Mohmand Tribal Area. The family lives miles from the nearest public school, which is so badly run that few kids attend. It's not unusual in Pakistan to hear of public schools that receive no books, no supplies, and no subsidies from the government. Thousands more are "ghost schools" that exist only on paper, to line the pockets of phantom teachers and administrators. Faced with choosing between bad public schools and expensive private ones, many poor parents send their children to the madrassas, where they get a roof over their heads, three meals a day, and a Koran-based education—for free.

Pervez Hoodbhoy lives every day with the consequences of the lack of public education in Pakistan. An MIT-trained professor of nuclear physics at Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad, he was speaking to a graduate-level class in physics a few days after the huge earthquake that devastated Kashmir in 2005, describing the geophysical forces that produced the disaster. "When I finished, hands shot up all over the room," he recalls. "'Professor, you are wrong,' my students said. 'That earthquake was the wrath of God.' "

This, he says, is the legacy of General Zia-ul-Haq, whose education ministry issued guidelines on bringing an Islamic perspective to science and other subjects in the public schools. "The Zia Generation has come of age," he says. "It isn't Islamic to teach that earthquakes are caused by the movement of tectonic plates. Instead, you are supposed to say, by the will of Allah, an earthquake happens." Today a government commission is working to modernize education, but "it goes deeper than updating textbooks," he says. "It's a matter of changing society."

A few miles from Hoodbhoy's classroom, I come upon a crowd of children in a vacant lot. It turns out to be another school—this one a free school for hundreds of street children run by a fireman named Muhammad Ayub, who founded the school 25 years ago because he felt sorry for the kids running wild in the neighborhoods nearby, dropouts who seemed destined for a jail cell, or a slab at Edhi's morgue. Ayub hands me his business card. It bears the name of the school: Second Time Civil Defense Educational Institution on Self Help Basis. "All my teachers are former students," he says proudly, gesturing to two men and a young woman with freckles, standing before the kids, who are laughing and carrying on. "See the looks on their faces?" he says. "This is the future I want for our country."

On a small hill nearby, a group of three or four students from a nearby madrassa, stern young men in their early 20s, are watching Ayub's class. Perhaps they are drawn to the laughing girl with the freckles, who isn't wearing a veil, or perhaps it is something more sinister. They are looking across the divide that runs down the middle of Pakistan, and it's not clear what they are thinking.

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