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The Middleman

Maulana Fazlur Rahman is considered the godfather of Mullah Omar's Taliban. So why is the new generation of Taliban in Pakistan trying to kill him?

By Nicholas Schmidle

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MAULANA FAZLUR RAHMAN GRIPPED A SWORD with two hands, and raised it over his head before 25,000 fervent Islamist supporters on a steamy summer night last year in Lahore. The crowd chanted "Islamic Revolution!" Rahman — just over 5-feet tall, with a thick, tin-colored beard, and his signature orange turban — finally put down the sword and approached the podium, all 300 pounds of him. "Friends of America are traitors," his voice boomed, as the crowd roared with approval. "Go away America! Pakistan is ours!"

Rahman used to be the Islamist we all feared. He heads a political party that took control of two of Pakistan's four provinces in the last election. More than 10,000 Islamic seminaries profess political allegiance to him. Thousands of Taliban warriors, many who later fought against the United States, first imbibed radical theology in Rahman's madrassas. His black-and-white-striped flag flies on minarets and car antennas throughout the North West Frontier Province in western Pakistan.

And yet now, more than a year later, Rahman is struggling to maintain command of his empire of fundamentalists. The 54-year old, regarded by many as a godfather of Mullah Omar's Taliban, is having a mid-life crisis, mullah-style, with global consequences. Suddenly Rahman isn't radical enough to keep pace with the new generation of Taliban wreaking havoc in Pakistan. The second-generation jihadis threaten to hijack Rahman's Islamist movement in western Pakistan. And they may be trying to kill him.

Rahman is too proud to admit he's losing touch with Taliban militants hiding out in the North West Frontier Province and Federally Administered Tribal Areas, where, according to this summer's National Intelligence Estimate, al-Qaeda has regrouped and may be planning an attack on the American homeland. But close friends in Rahman's hometown of Dera Ismail Khan are less reserved. "The religious forces are very divided right now," said Abdul Hakim Akbari, a childhood friend of Rahman's and lifelong member of his party, Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI). "Everyone is afraid. These mujahideen don't respect anyone anymore. They don't even listen to each other. And they see Maulana Fazlur Rahman as a hurdle to their ambitions."

Last April, a rocket whistled over the sugarcane fields that distance Rahman's house from the main road, before crashing into the veranda of his brother's home next door. A few months later, Pakistani intelligence agencies discovered a hit list, drafted by the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, with Rahman's name on it. "The Maulana is a moderate. He wants dialogue," said Akbari, who spoke in Pashto

through a translator. "But these mujahideen have become too extreme."

Rahman once seemed ready to introduce Taliban-style rule to Pakistan. Now he is trying to save it from that same fate. If he can't succeed, can anyone?

RAHMAN GREW UP IN ABDUL KHEL, A CONSERVATIVE PASHTUN VILLAGE in the North West Frontier Province, surrounded by sand dunes and date palms. It's a place where women, already covered head to toe in burqas, turn their backs to oncoming car traffic out of modesty. Rahman's father, Mufti Mehmood, had eight children, from two wives. Mehmood led JUI, beginning in the early 1950s. The party's top leaders, most of them mullahs, demanded Pakistan be made an Islamic state. They spread their message to the lower-class Pashtuns in the North West Frontier Province, which remains their political base. Though Rahman was the oldest of five sons, Mehmood discouraged him from entering politics. "He said politics would only disturb my studies," Rahman told me, as we sat together in the drawing room of his home in Dera Ismail Khan. Halogen spotlights dotted the ceiling and soft, brown-leather couches lined the walls. Rahman wore a pin-striped waistcoat over a shalwar kameez. The room smelled of strong cologne.

I asked him if he ever considered another line of work.

"Never. I was from a religious family," he said, also speaking in Pashto. "And it was expected that I would follow the same path my father did." Mehmood blazed a path that entangled the destinies of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the United States — and which ultimately opened the way to the terrorist attacks on September 11. In 1979, he helped kick-start the Afghanistan jihad by issuing a fatwa against the Soviet-backed, communist government in Kabul. But a year later, Mehmood, an obese, diabetes patient, died of a heart attack. (Rahman also suffers from diabetes.) An emotional 27-year-old madrassa student with scant political experience, Rahman inherited JUI and his father's jihadi enterprise.

Soon after, Rahman spent three years in jail for opposing Pakistan's pious, yet ruthless, military dictator at the time, General Zia ul-Haq. He got out in 1985 and worked on cultivating his pragmatic side and playing power politics in Islamabad. Rahman joined the establishment just before the Taliban took over Afghanistan. In 1993, then Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto named him Chairman of the National Assembly's Standing Committee for Foreign Affairs, a post that "enabled him to have influence on foreign policy for the first time," writes Ahmed Rashid in his bestselling book, *Taliban*. Many of the Taliban graduated from madrassas aligned with

his party; Rahman referred to them as "our boys." He believes that, particularly in the Taliban's later years, he was having a moderating influence on Mullah Omar. Perhaps in a few years, more countries than just Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, would have recognized Omar's regime. "They should have been given more time," Rahman told me.

Rahman's links with the Taliban brought him into contact with al-Qaeda too. In 1998, shortly after 75 American cruise missiles slammed into an al-Qaeda-run training camp in Afghanistan, Rahman issued a fatwa: if Osama bin Laden was killed in a U.S. missile strike, then Muslims were obliged to kill any American they found. When I asked him about it, Rahman denied that it was a proper



fatwa. "You people think that anyone with a beard who says anything is giving a fatwa," Rahman said. He claims that he was simply making a descriptive statement, with no moral binding. Rahman revels in such kind of ambiguity; it's part of what makes him such an effective politician. "I didn't say that any American *should* be killed, I said that no American would be safe if bin Laden was killed, that 'Today you are creating problems in our part of the world; tomorrow these problems can come back to you.'"

Rahman switched from Pashto to halting English and said, in a smug tone oozing with vindication, "This was just my political vision."

I replied that, coming from someone in his shoes, a "political vision" of Americans being killed could easily be mistaken as a terrorist threat.

"That depends on you," he said. In other words, it was up to America to decide whether he was a terrorist — or a prescient politician. "Did what you used to say about me prove correct, or did what I used to say about the situation prove correct? I am the same person that I was then."

Less than a year after the Taliban government fell in Kabul, Rahman formed a coalition of Islamist parties, along with the more urban and radical Jamaat-i-Islami, to contest the 2002 elections. Their campaign slogan was pro-Taliban, anti-American, and spiked with promises to implement *sharia*, or Islamic law. The alliance, known as the Muttahida Majles Amal, or MMA, won more than 10 percent of the popular vote nationwide, the highest ever for an Islamist party in Pakistan. It also earned them a chance to govern in Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province, the two provinces bordering Afghanistan. Foreign and domestic critics of the MMA feared that the group would "Talibanize" the two provinces.

"There was a bad image of us, because of 9/11 and the war in Afghanistan," Rahman said. He sought to correct this image. And in late October, 2002, he invited a group of foreign diplomats, journalists, and NGO leaders to a press conference at the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad. "I felt it was my duty to remove these misperceptions and explain that we were not extremists and that we renounced violence."

The press conference illustrated Rahman's pragmatism and evolution as a mainstream politician in Pakistan. But his excessive politicking, and pandering to foreigners, began to tarnish his image in the minds of conservative, militant, and oftentimes illiterate, supporters. A distance grew between Rahman and his base. Was he abandoning the jihadis, or were the jihadis abandoning him?

THE SOUND OF AN EXPLOSION punctured an otherwise pleasant evening. I had been sitting under a giant mango tree, drinking Southern Comfort with a group

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of friends, including a mid-level intelligence officer in the army who I will call "Arif." It was my first night in Dera Ismail Khan, Rahman's hometown. While the blast jerked me upright, no one else seemed too bothered. Locals had gotten used to the bangs and booms. The previous night, the Taliban had bombed a music store in the town bazaar. The sound I heard was the explosion from a small grenade targeting the owner of a cable TV service.

President Pervez Musharraf's government says the increasingly frequent bombings are evidence of "Talibanization" creeping east from the Afghanistan border. The Taliban-conducted terrorism typically falls into one of two categories: attacks on Pakistani security forces; and bombings of stores selling un-Islamic CDs, cable TV operators, massage parlors, and other locales the Taliban consider havens of vice. A newspaper editor in Dera Ismail Khan showed me a letter he had received, signed by the Taliban, warning him not to print anything that defamed the Taliban. They threatened to blow up his office if he didn't comply.

"Ninety-eight percent of the threats and attacks are just people settling old scores," Arif, the intelligence agent, told me. The Pakistani Taliban were not a unified, hierarchical organization, he added, sipping his drink. The threatening letters they sent to shopkeepers and newspaper editors proved it. Each of them were signed by a different Taliban faction. The Pakistani Taliban are a loose collection of gangs, working under the Taliban franchise. Arif said that any bandit or criminal could don a beard and a black turban, call himself a Taliban, and act with impunity. "The militants know that the Frontier government will not dare to do anything against someone wearing a black turban," said Arif. Rahman's Islamist colleagues in the North West Frontier Province Assembly (before they resigned in October) could not afford to jeopardize their own political standing by throwing "Taliban" in jail. After all, they had campaigned in support of the Taliban in Afghanistan. How could arrest the Taliban in Pakistan?

Rahman resents the allegation that he has facilitated the local Taliban. He doesn't pretend to be a liberal, yet he prides himself as a constitutionalist and a democrat. He wants to see Pakistan become a truly Islamic state. But the moral vigilantism and proliferation of Taliban-inspired militias is not how he imagined it happening. "My demands are limited to what has been said in the 1973 Constitution regarding the formulation and implementation of Islamic laws," he said. "If you want to change the constitution, you need a majority in the parliament. But it takes a political struggle, not an armed one, to get that majority... We are politicians, and we will have to go to our constituencies to get votes in an election. If there is a war going on, no one can vote." He added, in a brief moment of candor, "But even we are now afraid of the young men fighting."

While the Taliban hide behind the political cover pro-

vided by Rahman's party, they do not tolerate anyone else who thinks they can. Hamid Khan owns a computer store in Dera Ismail Khan and is the nephew of JUI's former finance secretary. I met Khan in his store, where he sells bootlegged software, computer games, educational DVDs and Islamic CDs. "Except ones about jihad," he said. Khan and I spoke in Urdu. Earlier this summer, Khan received two stamped and signed letters from the Taliban. He was not necessarily put off by the threats — "stop selling XXX DVDs or we will bomb your store" — because, in Dera Ismail Khan these days, "everybody gets them." But the letter warned Khan not to rely on his uncle to bail him out: "Don't think you will be spared just because you are the nephew of a JUI leader."

Letters like Khan's suggest that Rahman and JUI may no longer be the toughest Islamists on the block. But the insurrection at the Red Mosque in Islamabad this summer fully exposed the divide between the pro-Taliban leaders of yesterday and those of today.

In January, Abdul Rashid Ghazi and his brother, leaders of the Red Mosque, launched a Taliban-inspired movement in the country's capital. They kidnapped a brothel madam, a few police officers, and finally, seven Chinese masseuses. They torched a bonfire of CDs and DVDs, and demanded that Musharraf implement sharia. Defenders paced the walls of the mosque holding guns and sharpened garden tools. Rahman tried to talk the brothers out of their reckless adventure, but his influence inside the mosque was limited. "They are simply beyond me," he once confessed to Imran Khan, a political ally and chief of The Movement for Justice Party.

Ghazi and an entourage of Islamic militants fought against the state security forces in early July. The real rebellion, however, occurred in the preceding months, when Ghazi and his brother flouted efforts by the *ulema* to talk them down. Traditionally, the religious scholars have been the ones who wielded authority over the jihadis. Yet when JUI criticized Ghazi's kidnapping tactics, it fell on deaf ears. After that, the examination board responsible for most of the madrassas in Pakistan cancelled the registration of Ghazi's two seminaries, again to no affect. Finally, Mufti Taqi Usmani, a scholar of immense repute who acted as *pir*, or spiritual guide, to Ghazi's brother, disowned his former disciple. Back in April, when I asked Ghazi how he felt with the entire old guard turning against him, he looked more amused than worried. "Everywhere you look, you can see youngsters rejecting the old ones because old people do not like change," he said. "They are rigid."

Before army commandos killed him in July, Ghazi promised that a government assault on the Red Mosque would be a blessing for the "mujahideen." His "martyrdom," he used to say, would further invigorate the jihadis and expedite an Islamic Revolution in Pakistan. Since his death, more than 300 soldiers and policemen have died in suicide blasts or in gun-fights against the Taliban; jihadis

in South Waziristan kidnapped — and are still holding — more than 250 soldiers. (In a Taliban-produced DVD circulating around Dera Ismail Khan, a young teenager saws the head off of one of the soldiers, while three of his adolescent peers chant "Allahu Akbar" in the background.) The tribal agencies of Bajaur, North Waziristan, and South Waziristan, as well as the "settled" district of Swat, are essentially Taliban-ruled enclaves. But Imran Khan, the politician, disputes the government's claim that the wave of violence is a manifestation of "Talibanization." "Remember that while the Taliban were in power in Afghanistan, there was no Talibanization in the Tribal Areas," he said. "Today, it is more about politics. That's why people show allegiance to the Taliban." Many people living near the border, he said, think of the Pakistani Army as being, "a mercenary force for the United States. Anyone who wants to fight the Pakistani Army can go and fight alongside the Taliban."

Maybe the fact that the Pakistani Taliban are fighting for politics and revenge, not for Islam and country, is why Rahman's hold is slipping. Or maybe it's because the neo-Taliban are no longer strictly a product of Rahman's madrassas, a common scapegoat for explaining militant Islam. A jihadi who studies in a madrassa affiliated with Rahman's party is more likely to fall within Rahman's orbit of influence. The Red Mosque's Ghazi, for example, never studied in a madrassa. He went to secular universities, studied English, and got an M.A. in International Relations. The death of his father (Ghazi blamed the Pakistani intelligence services), and later, the American invasion of Afghanistan, radicalized him and legions of others. Before 2001, suicide bombs and beheadings were unheard of in Pakistan. During the last two weeks of October, suicide bombers in Karachi, Swat, and Rawalpindi, killed more than 200 people. The American occupation of Afghanistan has, unwittingly, infused contemporary Pakistani society with a jihadi impulse, one becoming more and more radical every day.

Tayyab is a 27-year-old former Taliban fighter from Dera Ismail Khan. He is also the son of Abdul Hakim Akbari, Rahman's childhood friend. I met Tayyab at his home one evening during the month of Ramadan, and we broke the ritual fast with dates, samosas, and spicy chicken legs. Later, Tayyab showed me the thumb-sized scar on his chest from a bullet wound he received while fighting alongside the Taliban against the Northern Alliance in Bagram, Afghanistan. He fetched an album to show me pictures of him and his Taliban friends posing in a photo booth in Kandahar. One of the men in picture, Tayyab said, was killed last year in an American air strike.

I asked if he had any friends training in the Taliban- and al-Qaeda-run camps in nearby South Waziristan.

"Plenty," he replied, speaking through an interpreter in Pashto. But Tayyab had no desire to go himself. Why were they training to fight their own people? Afghanistan is occupied by a foreign country, where jihad is allowed.



Tayyab and the author standing in front of Mufti Mehmood's grave in Abdul Khel, Rahman's ancestral village.

But Pakistan is not ripe for jihad. I asked him if he told his old friends what he thought. "It doesn't matter," Tayyab said. "They are so brainwashed that they don't even listen to Islamic arguments any more."

A few days later, I met Rahman and asked him if acts of tribal revenge and fighting against one's own army could be classified as jihad. "People always label a war according to their own thinking," he said.

How did he label it?

Rahman paused. "You should not ask such questions from me," he said, cagily. He looked away, wishing to move on to another question.

I pressed him. "Why shouldn't I ask you?"

"Because my answer can create many problems. We, as ulema, are still debating this topic of whether or not this is jihad," he said. Rahman took another deep breath and paused. He does this a lot. He is a calculating speaker. In these pauses, I pictured him imagining how his next statement would look on the front page of a newspaper. "But personally, I believe that jihad is not fighting. It is struggle. And wherever struggle exceeds its limits, I am against it."

And does he still consider the Taliban, even those who might be firing rockets at his house, to be "his boys?"

"Definitely. But because of America's policies, they have gone to the extreme. I am trying to bring them back into the mainstream," he said. "We don't disagree with the mujahideen's cause, but we differ over priorities. They prefer to fight, but I believe in politics."

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS ARE APPROACHING in Pakistan, and their results could illustrate a lot about where Rahman stands with his most committed supporters. Chaudhry Sharif, a JUI member from Dera Ismail Khan, thinks that Rahman is going to find problems just drafting a campaign strategy. "In the last election, everything was related to Afghanistan and how innocent Afghans were being killed," Sharif said. "But now he has to answer his people when they ask him, 'What happened in our own country?'" Since the MMA took power in the North West Frontier Province, terrorist attacks have killed hundreds of civilians. Neither Rahman nor his colleagues have condemned any of them. Pakistan's secular media argues that his silence implies his support for the attacks. But with his credibility already on the wane in some jihadi circles, Rahman may not have any other choice; if he condemns the Taliban, he commits political suicide.

Campaigning on security issues will amount to a toothless strategy, but so will any talk of implementing sharia. Other Islamists, like a young, renegade cleric in the Swat Valley named Maulana Fazlullah, have snatched

that slogan. From 2002 until recently, Fazlullah headed the Movement for the Implement of Sharia, known by its Urdu acronym, TNSM. But over the past year, Fazlullah took his own militia and set out freelance. Twice a day, he delivers a radio address, broadcast to tens of thousands of people in Swat over his illegal station. He preaches about the virtues of sharia, the ills of female education, and the honor of jihad and the Taliban.

“People like Maulana Fazlullah are working at the grassroots level,” Rahman told me. “But we are political people. We go to an area, deliver a speech, ask for votes and come back.” Fazlullah, meanwhile, goes door-to-door, day in and day out. Unless you live in the communities he targets, you have no way of knowing his strength until it’s too late. “He just suddenly came out and surprised everyone,” said Rahman. In retaliation for the assault on the Red Mosque in July, Fazlullah’s militiamen and suicide bombers have launched attacks on convoys and police stations throughout the Swat Valley. And like his friend Abdul Rashid Ghazi, Fazlullah promises to pose yet another challenge to the traditional order of religious scholars and politicians.

When I asked Rahman if he had any control over Fazlullah, he said the negotiating efforts of the JUI leader there, Qari Abdul Bais, were saving Fazlullah and the Pakistani Army from going to war. But when I met Bais, a septuagenarian with a cane, he seemed far more humble in his estimation of Fazlullah: “He is totally out of control.”

MOHAMMAD SHER WAS THE THIRD, and final, criminal to scale the steps of the wooden platform, supported by drum barrels and erected by Fazlullah’s gang. This is where they performed public punishments. Sher was in his late teens. He and two others were accused of aiding a team of kidnappers. Fazlullah’s “mujahideen” caught the kidnappers as they were transporting two women out of Swat. The Taliban sent the women back home and arrested everyone involved with the crime. Sher was among them. Now he looked like he might collapse, legs wobbling with fear, as hundreds of heavily armed Taliban spread out around him. Another 15,000 men and boys from Swat, some sitting on picnic blankets, waited to see Sher receive 15 lashes — the appropriate Islamic sentence, according to Fazlullah.

Sher laid face-down on the platform. Taliban held his arms and legs so he wouldn’t flop around. Another jihadi, clutching a thick, leather whip, roughly two feet long and six inches wide, wore a camouflage shalwar kameez and a ski-mask over his face. Every time the whip crashed on Sher’s back, the crowd called out the corresponding number of lashes as if they were counting the final seconds of a basketball game. Sher’s body convulsed under the crack and thud of each lash; when he finally stood up, he was shaking with tears.

“This punishment is permitted in Islam,” announced

one of Fazlullah’s deputies over a PA system fixed to a flatbed truck parked beside the platform. Besides the three criminals, who were lashed in turn, a dozen militants stood on the platform, holding Kalashnikovs and rocket-launchers. I saw Taliban fighters wherever I looked. One lay on his stomach on the roof of a nearby shed, his eyes lined up behind the sights of an automatic machine gun. Everyone knew that Fazlullah’s decision to take the law into his own hands was a blatant provocation of the government’s writ: the militants’ job was to repel any sudden ambush by the Pakistani Army or paramilitary forces; the deputy on the PA system had to convince the people that the lashings accorded with Islamic law. “Even if there is no central Islamic government, these punishments are permitted in parts of the country if it contributes to maintaining peace,” the deputy explained, speaking in Pashto. “We have no intention to occupy the government or for any political authority. This is only for peace and security.”

Fazlullah’s base is a sprawling mosque and madrassa compound in the village of Imam Dehri, located across the river from Mingora, the main town in Swat. The entire Swat Valley is surrounded by mountains blanketed with pine forests. The Swat River pours from the peaks of the Hindu Kush Mountains and meanders through the valley, nourishing apple and persimmon orchards. During the summer, thousands of tourists flock here for a break from the heat and humidity choking the lowlands. When I visited Swat in June, still weeks before the Red Mosque operation began, I had trouble getting a room at the exclusive Serena Hotel. By the time I returned in October, I was the only guest. Almost immediately after arriving in Mingora the second time around, I saw why. At the edge of town, hundreds of Taliban rode in four flat-bed trucks, pointing weapons in the air and ordering motorists to remove the tape-decks from their cars. Fazlullah, like his Taliban predecessors in Afghanistan, deems music — and anything that plays music — un-Islamic.

The next Friday, I went to Imam Dehri, where I met the commander of Fazlullah’s militia, a man with glacier-blue eyes named Sirajuddin. (Fazlullah appeared briefly, as a gesture of hospitality, but he didn’t stay long; he was observing *aitakaaf*, a meditation period that lasts ten days at the end of Ramadan.) To get from Mingora to Imam Dehri, my Pashto translator and I boarded a small carriage attached to a zip-line. Six other people piled in. Someone gave us a light push to get moving, and then we soared over the Swat River. Sirajuddin waited on the other side. He paid the six Rupees we owed for the zip-line toll and led us to through a mingling crowd of Fazlullah’s supporters. The PA system outside blasted pre-recorded jihadi poems while Taliban walked freely with assault rifles slung over their shoulders.

“We are struggling for the enforcement of sharia,” Sirajuddin told me inside a brick shed that doubled as his office. “Twice, in 1994 and 1999, the government said it was committed to enforcing sharia in this area, but it

never did. The people here want Islam to be a way of life." He added, "We are Muslims, but our legal system is based on English laws. The objective of our patrols is to replace the English system with an Islamic one."

Four Taliban sat in the room with us, watching me with dark, intent eyes. I asked one of them, a 32-year-old named Abdul Ghafoor, what he was fighting for. Islam? Revenge? "This is not personal revenge, this is our religious obligation," he told me, speaking through an interpreter. Ghafoor crouched on a low stool, a Kalashnikov resting on his lap. He wore a long beard, a black turban, an ammunition vest stuffed with extra banana clips and a pistol, and Reebok hi-tops (with a Velcro strap and the L.A. Lakers' color scheme of white, yellow, and purple). Messages crackled over the walkie-talkie attached to the collar of his vest. The Taliban were coordinating their movements.

Later, as Ghafoor and I walked from Sirajuddin's office to the platform where Mohammad Sher and his two accomplices were to be lashed, Ghafoor told me about his background. He said that he had recently graduated from Peshawar University with a Master's degree in Islamic Theology. He earned a living as a schoolteacher. In the late 1990s, he fought alongside the Taliban, against the Northern Alliance, but he had not gone back to Afghanistan to fight the Americans. There was too much to do in Swat. Every day after school, and on holidays, Ghafoor grabs his gun and joins Fazlullah.

After the lashings, thousands of people lined up to ride the carriage across the river again. To avoid having to wait, Ghafoor pointed us back to Mingora another way, through a cluster of villages loyal to Fazlullah. On the way, I asked Ghafoor what he thought about Maulana Fazlur Rahman. "He and his party deceived the public for votes, all in the name of Islam," Ghafoor said. Ghafoor voted for the MMA in 2002, hoping that they would enforce sharia as they promised. "But Maulana Fazlur Rahman didn't even implement an Islamic system within himself," Ghafoor said. "He gets photographed with women, which is against the principles of Islam. And he failed to resolve the Jamia Hafsa crisis. He couldn't protect all the innocent people who died."

We had gotten into an SUV and rode on a single-lane dirt road, lined with lush fields of cauliflower, apricot orchards, and persimmon trees, their ends tipped with the bright orange fruit. We passed through a village made of mud-brick homes, and on one of the walls, someone had chalked "*Shariat ya Shahadat.*" ("Islamic Law or Martyrdom.") "I will never vote for the MMA again and we will totally boycott the next election," Ghafoor said. Democracy, he added, was un-Islamic.

"IF WE FORCE MUSHARRAF OUT, it will only change one person, not the whole setup. Changing one individual is not worth struggling for," Rahman told me during our first meeting at his home in Dera Ismail Khan.

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"Right now the military establishment is in power... There is always another general ready to take over."

Two weeks later, I met him in Peshawar, at the official residence of the chief minister of the North West Frontier Province, Akram Khan Durrani. At the time, Durrani was across town, tendering his resignation and dissolving the MMA-led government. All members of the opposition parties had planned to resign en masse just before Musharraf's re-election bid on October 6. If done according to plan, Durrani's government would not even exist on election day, and the whole process would look illegitimate. But Rahman dragged his feet, Durrani didn't resign until it was too late, and the strategy failed. The other leaders of the opposition parties derided Rahman for playing the part of a chameleon once again. But Rahman just wanted to keep his options open.

The ordeal put Rahman in the spot he relished most: somewhere in the middle. Whether he is floating between Musharraf and the opposition, or the government and the Taliban, Rahman plays the role of political vagabond well. Several analysts, diplomats, and politicians in Islamabad suspect that he might even be angling for the prime ministership again, a post he narrowly missed out on in 2002. In a recent meeting he had with the American Ambassador, Anne Patterson, Rahman said Patterson urged him to form an electoral alliance with Benazir Bhutto and Musharraf. "I am not against it," he confided. "But politically it is a bit hard for us to afford." Plus, the fact that the Americans thought Bhutto could tackle the Taliban simply baffled him. "She has no strategy in those areas, and nothing to do with those people," he said.

Another diplomat, requesting anonymity, called Rah-



Rahman and the author at the chief minister of NWFP's official residence.

man one of the most sophisticated politicians in Pakistan. When I asked him if his confidence in Rahman would continue if Rahman ever assumed a post like prime minister, the diplomat sounded cautious. He said it was hard to know if Rahman would promote a progressive social agenda and continue to fight the "War on Terror" as the West saw fit. Plus, he added, "It would not send a good signal about the direction Pakistan was taking for someone like Fazlur Rahman to become prime minister."

Sitting on PVC-made lawn furniture in the shade of a large oak tree in the chief minister's garden, Rahman rubbed a strand of chunky, orange prayer beads. We talked about the changing leadership in the borderlands of Pakistan, and how more than 200 pro-government *maliks*, or tribal elders, had been killed by the local Taliban in the past five years. Oftentimes, the Taliban dumped the bodies by the side of the road for passersby to see, with a note, written in Pashto, pinned to the corpse's chest, calling him as a spy. "When the jihad in Afghanistan started, the maliks and the old tribal system in Afghanistan ended; a new leadership arose, based on jihad. Similarly is the case here in Waziristan. The old, tribal system is being relegated to the background and a new leadership, composed of these young militants, has emerged," Rahman said. "This is something natural."

Though Rahman describes the rise of the local Taliban in evolutionary terms, he explains it as a result of a leadership crisis in Pakistan. He respects the secular-minded people who created Pakistan, but thinks that social and religious changes over the past two decades have made such leaders, well, irrelevant. "We have to adjust to reality, and that demands new leaders with new visions."

I asked if he considered himself that new leader, with a new vision.

"I don't consider myself as someone extraordinary. I have the same feelings as everyone else in the current age: if the weather is warm, everyone feels warm; if it is cold, everyone feels cold," Rahman said. "The difference between me and other people is in our responsibilities."

He took a long breath of the fresh, fall air, continued rubbing his prayer beads, and leaned over the chair to spit. "That's why I am so careful, because my decisions can affect many, many people. I am trying to bring people back from the fire, not push them towards it." □

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