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LETTERS

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PAKISTAN

Nicholas Schmidle is a Phillips Talbot Fellow of the Institute studying identity and politics in Pakistan.

Dispatches from Pakistan:
Stumping with the Candidates

By Nicholas Schmidle

JANUARY 2008

Pakistanis were scheduled to go to the polls on January 8 to choose a new parliament, but the election schedule was adjusted following the December 27 assassination of Benazir Bhutto. In December and January, I spent several weeks traveling throughout the country to report on the campaign. Though the elections were postponed until February 18, these dispatches paint a portrait of the country's mood heading toward the polls, and feature stories from Pakistan's three least-reported provinces: Sindh, the North West Frontier Province, and Baluchistan. A different version of this series originally appeared in Slate.

KARACHI, Pakistan

I arrived in Karachi on New Year's Eve, just as the seaside metropolis was limping back to normal after four days of rioting and looting in the aftermath of the December 27 assassination of Benazir Bhutto. The day felt like the first after a blizzard, but instead of snowdrifts blocking driveways, burnt-out vehicles littered the road. More than 900 cars, buses, and trucks were torched in Karachi alone. Shocked by the violence, investors panicked, and when the Karachi Stock Exchange opened Monday morning, it was down almost 5 percent. Long lines of cars streamed out of gas stations, where pumps had been closed for days. Shopkeepers tentatively

The burned-out offices of the Muttahida Quami Movement

opened up, keeping their metal shutters halfway down in case they needed to close in a hurry. Then, around lunchtime, a rumor spread through the city that a top politician from Bhutto's rival party in Karachi, the Muttahida Quami Movement, had been assassinated. The already spooked city of 15 million immediately withdrew back into its shell. Gas stations and stores shut down early in anticipation of more violence. Normalcy would have to wait another day. (The rumors proved false.)

That morning, I met Syed Hafeezuddin, a hopeful for the upcoming parliamentary elections, originally scheduled for January 8 but postponed until Febuary 18. Hafeezuddin belongs to the faction of the Pakistan Muslim League headed by Nawaz Sharif, known as the PML (Nawaz). (In 2002, Musharraf's supporters created their own faction, the Pakistan Muslim League [Q].) After Bhutto's murder, many of her enraged supporters blamed Musharraf's government for—at least—negligence and failure to provide adequate security for the two-time former prime minister. Some even alleged that Musharraf's role was more direct and nefarious. As a result, looters attacked the offices of the PML (Q) and the pro-Musharraf MQM, burning everything inside and forcing their candidates underground. Meanwhile, Sharif, who rushed to the hospital after Bhutto's murder and who has pledged to topple Musharraf, received a boost both because of his new bond with Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party—and because Sharif now leads the opposition to Musharraf. "We are the only ones who can still run a public campaign," Hafeezuddin told me.

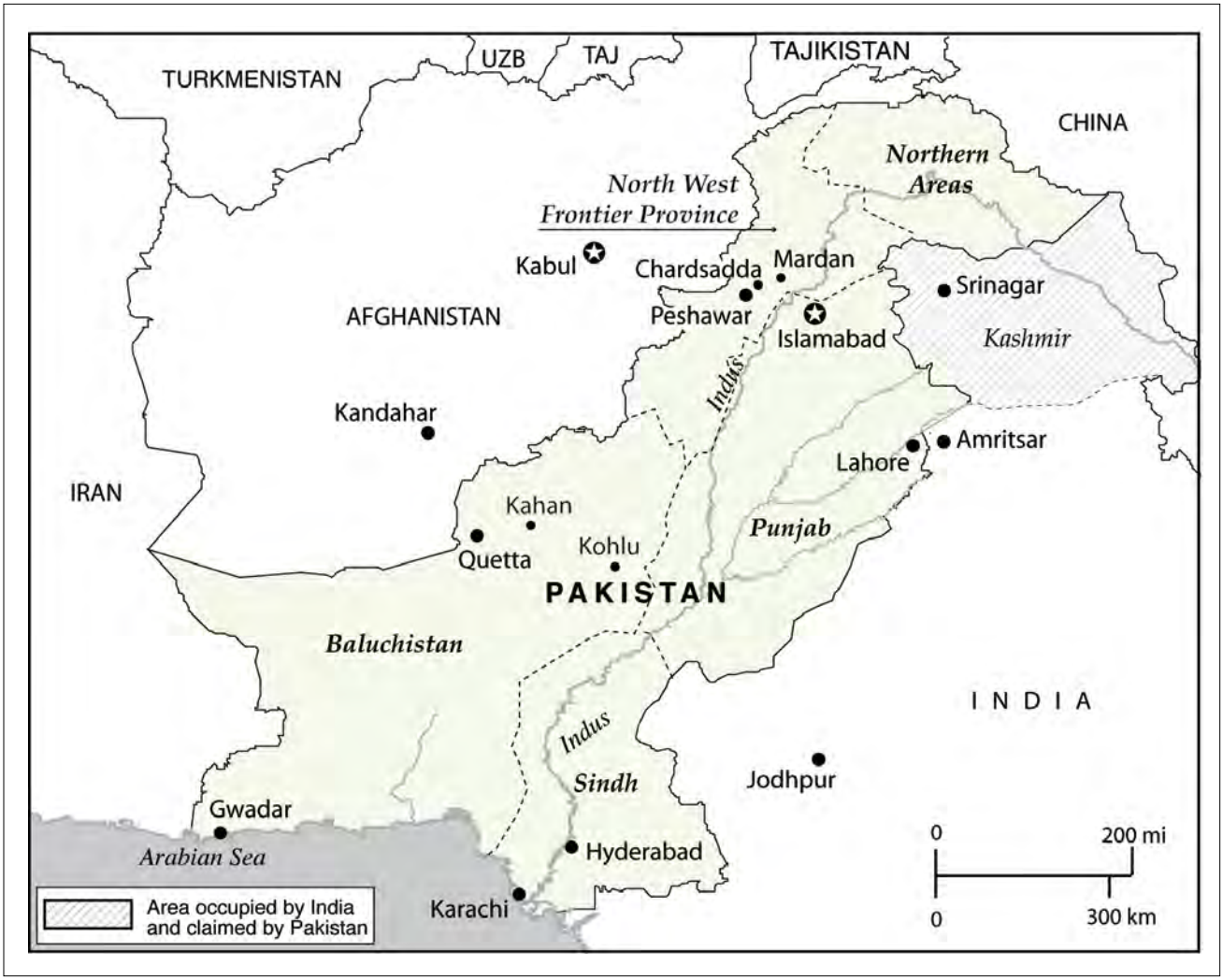
Hafeezuddin and I headed to Machar ("Mosquito") Colony, a slum built on top of a swamp, where two days earlier, a teenage boy had apparently been shot and killed by paramilitary Rangers. Hafeezuddin wanted to offer a funeral prayer with the family before they buried the teenager. A small fire burned in a mound of trash just behind us, and the slum smelled like a combination of sewage and spoiled fish. When the residents recognized Hafeezuddin from his campaign posters, they began to complain about the lack of electricity, water, and trash removal. "I take one bath a week, if I am lucky," one man said. Hafeezuddin, who is more than 6 feet tall, towered above them and made lofty promises. Then, a few hundred yards away, gunfire rang out. Unsure which direction it was coming from, people scattered and sprinted for cover. Hafeezuddin and I jumped into his car and sped away. No one was totally insulated from the security risks of campaigning.

Hafeezuddin (left) trying to win over voters

Hafeezuddin drove to another spot where, the day after Bhutto's assassination, he had organized a gathering in her memory. "I can't leave the PPP alone right now," he said. The PPP were riding a wave of sympathy, and Hafeezuddin knew that he would lose the election if he didn't seize the initiative by leading the agitation against Musharraf and sympathizing over Bhutto's loss. "I've tactfully taken on the PPP by sponsoring events in Benazir's honor and then inviting PPP supporters," he said. "I make them come to *my* events." A goat walked down the street wearing a T-shirt. "Benazir didn't just belong to the PPP, just like they didn't own the memory of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. We, the people of Pakistan, own the Bhuttos and their memories."

A trash fire in the Machar Colony slum.

Most pundits and analysts agreed that the PPP was poised to win big in the February elections, in large part because of



the sympathy vote they were expected to receive. Hafeezuddin understood this all too well, which is why, even while Sharif originally united with the PPP in demanding that the elections be held on January 8 as planned, Hafeezuddin quietly prayed for a delay. "I need some time to let the sympathy vote die down," he confided. After all, he was contesting a seat in Karachi, the capital of Sindh province, where the Bhuttos have long been powerful.

Nonetheless, in the week following the assassination, it seemed that the PPP's chances of winning big in Punjab and the North West Frontier Province were jeopardized because of the ethnic dimension that the riots took on. Pakistan is divided into four provinces — Punjab, Baluchistan, the North West Frontier Province, and Sindh — each one dominated by a different ethnic group. Punjab remains the most important when it comes to electoral politics, since its representation in the National Assembly is roughly equal to the small provinces combined. (Moreover, the majority of the judges and lawyers detained by the Musharraf government after the November 3 State of Emergency were being held in Punjab, under the orders of the Punjab provincial assembly. Whoever won the most votes in the provincial assembly also assumed the right to revoke the lawyers' and judges' detention.) The bulk of the post-assassination violence occurred in Sindh, much of it directed at non-Sindhis, primarily people from Punjab and the North West Frontier Province. Pashtuns from the North West Frontier Province control most of the transport businesses in Pakistan. One transporter I met in Karachi had 190 of his trailers burnt on the stretch of highway running through the province. Moreover, some suspected that the PPP's decision to tap Bhutto's 19-year-old son, Bilawal, as the new head of the party would alienate voters in other provinces who didn't subscribe to the dynastic politics sanctioned by Sindhi customs and feudal traditions. Finally, Bhutto's husband, Asif Ali Zardari, who is widely perceived as a sleazy crook, is running the party until Bilawal comes of age. "Zardari will damage the PPP's national appeal," Hafeezuddin projected. "They will end up confining themselves to the interior of Sindh."

Did Benazir Bhutto herself sow the seeds of this crisis? In the months before she died, Bhutto focused her election campaign almost entirely in Sindh. Though she never pitched herself as a Sindhi leader or employed the rhetoric of Sindhi nationalism, her exhaustive campaigning gave Sindhis the impression that "one of theirs" was about to take power once again. At her burial, mourners chanted, in Sindhi, "We Don't Want Pakistan!" Such slogans raised concerns over the possibility of militant Sindhi nationalism reemerging, as it did during the 1970s and '80s. "Bhutto was killed only because she was a Sin-

An armored personnel carrier parked in front of a billboard showing the face of Benazir Bhutto and her father, the late Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto.

dhi woman," said Khaled, a 32-year-old member of Jeay Sindh, a party calling for an independent Sindhi state. In the press conference Zardari gave December 30, he made a point of saying, in Sindhi, "We want Pakistan, We want Pakistan." But has the damage been done?

I left Khaled and drove down a muddy, rutted road in Lyari, the section of Karachi worst hit by the violence. It hadn't rained in months, so the pools of slush in the road were, in fact, sewage. I read chalk graffiti dating back to Bhutto's return from exile on October 18. It said, in Urdu: "Go, Go, to the Karachi Airport, Go!" (Hundreds of thousands of people went, but more than 140 never came home after suicide bombers targeted Bhutto's motorcade.) We arrived at the local PPP office, where roughly a hundred women sat on the floor, weeping and reading the Quran in Bhutto's memory. "Oh Benazir, Princess of Heaven, we are sorry that your killers are still alive," they chanted. Afterward, Nasreen Chandio, a PPP stalwart and former member of the national assembly, assessed the impact of Bhutto's murder on the Sindhi people. "Sindhi nationalism has definitely been ignited because people realize that there will be no representation of Sindhis in the federation without Benazir," she said. "The people of Sindh have become orphans."

Supporters of the Awami National Party

PESHAWAR, Pakistan

A dozen men sat in a circle in a village outside Peshawar on a recent afternoon. Wearing red caps, they gossiped and drank green tea. The sun fell behind a roof, and several of the men wrapped wool blankets around themselves. All belonged to the Awami National Party, a secular political party based in the North West Frontier Province. The ANP was predicted to win big in the elections, mostly at the expense of the Islamist parties who had frightened U.S. policymakers for the past five years. "This election is a straight fight between those who want war and those who want peace," Asfandyar Wali Khan, leader of the ANP, told me. He drew a line between Islamic militants, on the one hand, and his own party, on the other. "It is between fundamentalism and moderation."

In the last elections, which took place in October 2002, the Muttahida Majles Amal, a six-party Islamist coalition, defeated the ANP, the Pakistan Peoples Party, and all other contenders by a wide margin in the North West Frontier Province and went on to form the provincial government. The MMA's critics, led by the ANP, alleged that the Islamists' rhetoric and sympathies allowed so-called "Talibanization" to spread throughout the regions bordering Afghanistan. Sitting in the circle of red-capped men, I asked if any of them had voted for the MMA last time around. One man sheepishly raised his hand. "That was a vote for paradise and the Quran," he said, as if excusing himself. "When they shoved the Quran in my face and said 'Vote!' I had no other choice. But once the MMA got their bungalows in Islamabad, everything changed. They went to Islamabad, not to Islam."

The World Bank praised the MMA government for its fiscal responsibility and health programs, but local perceptions of corruption, broken promises, and excessive politicking tarnished the coalition's image at home. "We expected them to implement Islamic law and establish a system of justice," said Salauddin, a middle-aged civil servant from Chardsadda. In 2002, the MMA pledged to implement sharia law and support the Taliban in Afghanistan. At the time, people couldn't have cared less about fiscal restraint. Now they have turned from the MMA, not because the Islamists were too hard core, but because they failed to fulfill their

A young ANP supporter holds a poster of Asfandyar Wali Khan.

campaign promises. What did they have so show for their time in government? "Acts of terrorism only increased under the mullahs," Salauddin exclaimed. During 2007, 60 suicide bomb attacks killed more than 770 people in Pakistan, according to a recent report by the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies. Most of the incidents occurred in the North West Frontier Province.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing the ANP has been the desire to rehabilitate the image of Pashtuns, the dominant ethnic group in western Pakistan and southern Afghanistan. Street-level supporters, such as the men in red caps, and party leaders cited this as their greatest concern. More than 25 million Pashtuns live along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, where they've been renowned as fierce fighters for centuries. Pashtun militias have repelled British armies, Sikh armies, Soviet armies, and now, American, NATO, and Pakistani ones too. The majority of the Taliban fighting in Afghanistan and Pakistan today are Pashtuns. "At this moment, if you talk about Pashtuns, the world thinks he is a terrorist, has a beard to his navel, hair to his shoulders, and holds a Kalashnikov," said Khan, the ANP chief. "Islamic fundamentalism is destroying the basic fabric of Pashtun society."

But the success of the ANP's election campaign (they won enough seats in the provincial assembly to form a government there, and will join the ruling coalition in the center) signaled a shift in the politics of the North West Frontier Province, where the rhetoric of secular nationalism found more appeal than that of Islamic fundamentalism. For instance, the ANP proposed changing the name of the province to Pashtunistan ("Land of the Pashtuns") or Pakhtunkhwa ("Pakhtun Nation"). (The MMA tried to change the name to Dar-ul-Islam, or "Domain of Islam.) Khan said that all the other provinces of Pakistan shared "frontiers" with Iran, Afghanistan, or India. They were all "frontier provinces." "But if they—Sindh, Punjab, and Baluchistan—can have their own names, why can't we? This is a matter of our identity."

According to Khan and the ANP, Pashtuns are not naturally brash, militant people—an impression that's been created by the Taliban. If anyone can reform the Pashtuns' image, Khan's family history suggests that he's the man for the job. His grandfather Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan earned the nickname "Frontier Gandhi" for his role in leading the Pashtuns in a nonviolent resistance movement against the British Raj during the 1930s and '40s. His organization became known as the "Red Shirts," which is why the ANP's flag is red and its supporters wear red caps. Ghaffar Khan opposed the Muslim League, the main outfit lobbying for the creation of Pakistan, and supported Gandhi's Congress Party. Ghaffar Khan argued that religious identity shouldn't determine the country where a person should live—and thus denied the rationale for the creation of Pakistan. Instead, Ghaffar Khan contended that ethnic identity was more important, and he called for the creation of an independent Pashtunistan. A year before the birth of Pakistan, fellow Muslims physically attacked him for being, in their minds, anti-Muslim, illustrating the tension that's long existed between Pashtun nationalists and Islamists.

To find out how the Islamists felt about their fall from power, I went to Mardan to meet Ata-ur-Rahman. Rahman is a senior leader of Jamaat-i-Islami and a former member of Pakistan's National Assembly. Jamaat-i-Islami is one of the main component parties in the MMA. In December, Jamaat-i-Islami opted to boycott the coming elections in protest against President Pervez Musharraf's regime and what they believed were destined to be rigged elections on February 18. I had met Rahman several times in the past, but when I arrived at his madrassa in late December, he appeared pensive and distracted. He didn't agree with the party's decision to boycott the elections and had argued that doing so would leave the field wide open for the ANP. He lost the argument, and now Jamaat-i-Islami expected him to convince local people of the merits of a boycott.

But what worried him most was the legacy that the

A Jamaat-i-Islami poster counsels supporters to boycott the elections.

Islamists had left behind. "The worst result of our rule was the rise in militancy throughout the region," he said. Rahman is a moderate, with a Ph.D. from the International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, as comfortable speaking English or Malay as he is speaking Urdu or Pashto. He is one of the only Islamists I had heard admit that so-called "Talibanization" was a product of the Islamists being in government.

We discussed the pro-Taliban uprising in the nearby Swat Valley, where a radical cleric determined to implement sharia was waging an insurgency against the state. I asked Rahman if he believed that people's disappointment with the MMA's failure to implement sharia had led some to turn to the Pakistani Taliban, believing they were the only ones capable of doing so. He nodded his head slowly and stared out the window. "If the MMA had been able to bring sharia to Swat, that would have definitely

weakened the militants," he said.

With those alternatives, does anyone wonder why U.S. policymakers are paralyzed when it comes to Pakistan?

The city of Mardan, on the day before Benazir Bhutto's assassination

QUETTA, Pakistan

Naiz Mohammad, an illiterate man who doesn't know his age but guesses he's around 50, squatted on a rocky hillside just outside Quetta and told me how he teaches his children. More than a dozen kids, caked head to toe in dust, crowded around, their bellies swollen with worms, greenish snot yo-yoing from their noses. A range of treeless mountains rose behind us and Quetta's parched cityscape spread in front. Hundreds of rectangular mud huts, all of them inhabited by Naiz's fellow tribesmen, stood scattered along the pitched slope. Spindly desert twigs snagged shreds of plastic shopping bags, which flapped in the biting wind. New Kahan, Naiz's village, has neither phone service nor electricity or running water. There is a government school nearby, but few kids actually attend. "We have a natural cycle of educating our people," said Naiz, who wore a black turban and camouflage jacket. "For instance, you people came today in a big jeep. When you leave, my boys will ask me, 'Why we don't have a jeep like that?' I'll tell them, and then they'll understand the deprivation that the Balochis suffer."

Quetta is the capital of Baluchistan, the largest—and poorest—of Pakistan's four provinces. The majority of Baluchistan's 10 million inhabitants are Baluchis, though Pashtun tribes form a significant minority in the northern part of the province, and there are Punjabi- and Urdu-speaking "settlers" living in Quetta. Since Pakistan's creation in 1947, a percolating Baluchi nationalist movement has resulted in five insurgencies against the Pakistani army, most intensely 1973-77 and from 2005 to today. The nationalists argue that Pakistan illegally occupied the independent Baluchi state in 1948 and has been treating the Balochis like colonial subjects ever since. When prospectors discovered natural gas in the remote mountains near Naiz's ancestral village in 1953, it only added to the Balochis' sense of perceived injustice; they were the last in the country to enjoy gas stovetops and furnaces.

Naiz Mohammad (in black turban) says, "Why should I vote in a Pakistani election? I don't even recognize Pakistan."

Naiz's tribe, the Marri, is the most militant and nationalist of the Baluchi tribes. During the 1970s rebellion against the government of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (Benazir's father), Naiz enlisted alongside guerrillas in an insurgency that left nearly 10,000 rebels and soldiers dead. "Then and now, we are only fighting for our rights, for an independent Baluchistan, where we are masters of our own land," he said. According to Naiz, the Pakistani government has punished the Baluchis by refusing to develop the province. But running water and electricity are not his top priorities. "We just want the government to stop bombing us."

Naiz is originally from Kahan, a town in the gas-rich district of Kohlu. In the late 1980s, after a stint living in Afghanistan, Naiz and thousands of fellow tribesmen moved to Quetta and established New Kahan, partly to escape the constant fighting and bombardment in their native lands and partly because they wanted to be near their tribal chief. The tribal system revolves around obedience to the chief, or *sardar*. President Pervez Musharraf blames a few *sardars*, including the one from the Marri tribe, for the violence and instability engulfing Baluchistan. Since 2005, a guerrilla outfit known as the Baluchistan Liberation Army has claimed responsibility for hundreds of attacks on army convoys, oil installations, and railroads. The Marris comprise the top leadership of the BLA, which Musharraf declared a banned terrorist organization in April 2006. Yet the BLA aren't alone; politicians, writers, and university students use their own means to argue for an independent Baluchistan. And while they stress the nonviolent nature of their own

tactics, their sympathies are unmistakable. "I pray for the BLA that God will help them remove the Punjabi forces from Baluchistan," said Mohiuddin Baluch, the chairman of the Baluchistan Students Organization.

I arrived in Quetta in early December, just as the election campaign was beginning, to find army and paramilitary forces deployed in the streets. An armored personnel carrier sat just outside the entrance to my hotel, machine-gun barrels poked out of sandbag bunkers at major intersections, and heavily armed convoys patrolled the roads every evening after sundown. Two weeks earlier, a top BLA commander (and son of the chief of the Marri tribe) was killed, setting off a wave of riots and guerrilla attacks on security forces that left dozens dead. I asked Naiz if he considered the dead BLA commander a fallen hero. "We don't live in circumstances where we have time to dream of heroes," he answered. "Independent Baluchistan is our hero. And sometimes we are obliged to carry out attacks on Pakistani forces to achieve this."

On my first night in Quetta, a soldier, standing behind a stack of sandbags near the center of town, took a bullet in the face and died. The intelligence agencies, police, and paramilitaries responded with house-to-house raids in BLA strongholds from Kohlu to Quetta. They cordoned off New Kahan and arrested 12 of Naiz's fellow tribesmen. In many cases over the last two years, young Baluchi men have simply "disappeared," kidnapped by Pakistan's intelligence agencies. Others have been arrested and charged with treason. (In the autumn of 2006, I spent several weeks reporting in Baluchistan; a few months later, nearly every person who featured in the newsletter had been arrested or exiled.) A politician in Quetta told me that 6,000 Baluchi men were missing. Another man described how his cousin had been kidnapped by Anti-Terror Force troops in front of his four nephews in a city park. I asked how the four kids, aged between 4 and 8, knew the identity of the kidnappers. "In America, your children play with toys. That's what they know," he explained. "Our children know about the intelligence agencies and the army. This is what they grow up on."

Nonetheless, not all the Baluchi tribes are fighting against the government. In fact, Musharraf's own party, the Pakistan Muslim League, is stacked with compliant *sardars* and tribal chieftains. "Though many of these tribes, since the inception of Pakistan, have been bearing anti-state feelings, some of them got on the bandwagon, and they've been ruling this province ever since," said Anwar ul-Haq, a first-time candidate for the parliamentary seat from Quetta, who ran on the PML ticket. "For these people, being part of the establishment presents a huge opportunity for personal aggrandizement." Later that day, I attended a PML rally with Haq in the same part of town where Western intelligence sources have alleged that Mullah Omar and other top Taliban leaders enjoy safe haven, in other words, a neighborhood where Musharraf and his cohorts are none too popular. Bodyguards assigned to protect the PML candidates stood on nearby rooftops, surrounded the stage, and mingled in the crowd. At one point, a rock hurled over the wall landed in the crowd of spectators. With a half-nervous smirk, my friend said, "At least it wasn't a grenade."

When it was his turn to speak, Haq leaned on the podium with both hands and promoted another local candidate because he wasn't a *sardar* and therefore "understands your problems." He added, "We will provide education, not Kalashnikovs, for your children. Now is the time for your decision. Give us your vote, and we will deliver." I asked Haq, a middle-class divorcee in his late 30s with no tribal roots and no obvious constituency, if he planned to campaign in New Kahan. Earlier that day, Naiz told me that no candidate had visited New Kahan in years, although there were roughly 4,000 voters there. "Ideally, no party should ignore any area," Haq answered. "But would the people in the Marri areas even allow me to go there? I doubt it. They only respond to certain social norms, those filtered through the tribe."

Back in New Kahan, I crouched beside Naiz, our jeep, and a horde of children, and shielded my eyes as a dust cloud blew across the exposed hillside. Naiz admitted that any decision about whether or not to vote, and for whom, would be decided by the tribal chiefs. Naiz hadn't participated in an election since 1995. I asked him which way he was leaning this time around. "Why should I vote in a Pakistani election?" he said. "I don't even recognize Pakistan." ❑

A bodyguard assigned to protect PML candidates

Current ICWA Fellows

Elena Agarkova • RUSSIA • May 2008 - 2010

Elena will be living in Siberia, studying management of natural resources and the relationship between Siberia's natural riches and its people. Previously, Elena was a Legal Fellow at the University of Washington's School of Law, at the Berman Environmental Law Clinic. She has clerked for Honorable Cynthia M. Rufe of the federal district court in Philadelphia, and has practiced commercial litigation at the New York office of Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy LLP. Elena was born in Moscow, Russia, and has volunteered for environmental non-profits in the Lake Baikal region of Siberia. She graduated from Georgetown University Law Center in 2001, and has received a bachelor's degree in political science from Barnard College.

Ezra Fieser • GUATEMALA • January 2008 - 2010

Ezra is interested in economic and political changes in Central America. He is an ICWA fellow living in Guatemala where he will write about the country's rapidly changing economic structure and the effects on its politics, culture and people. He was formerly the deputy city editor for *The* (Wilmington, Del.) *News Journal*, a staff writer for *Springfield* (Mass.) *Republican* and a Pulliam Fellow at *The Arizona Republic*. He is a graduate of Emerson College in Boston.

Suzy Hansen • TURKEY • April 2007 - 2009

A John O. Crane Memorial Fellow, Suzy will be writing about politics and religion in Turkey. A former editor at the *New York Observer,* her work has also appeared in *Salon*, the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Nation*, and other publications. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1999.

Derek Mitchell • INDIA • September 2007 - 2009

As a Phillips Talbot Fellow, Derek will explore the impact of global trade and economic growth on Indians living in poverty. He has served for the past year as a volunteer for Swaraj Peeth, an institute in New Delhi dedicated to nonviolent conflict resolution and Mahatma Gandhi's thought. Previously he was a Fulbright scholar in India at the Gandhi Peace Foundation. He has coordinated foreign policy research at George Washington University's Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies and worked as a political organizer in New Hampshire. Derek graduated with a degree in religion from Columbia University.

Nicholas Schmidle • PAKISTAN • February 2006 - 2008

Nick is a freelance writer interested in the intersection of culture, religion, and politics in Asia. He's in Pakistan as an ICWA fellow, examining issues of ethnic, sectarian, and national identity. Previously, he reported from Central Asia and Iran. His work has been published in the *Washington Post*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Foreign Policy*, *the Christian Science Monitor*, and elsewhere. He holds a master's degree in International Affairs from American University.

Raphael Soifer • BRAZIL • April 2007-2009

An actor, director, playwright, musician and theatre educator, Raphi Soifer is a Donors' Fellow studying, as a participant and observer, the relationship between the arts and social change in communities throughout Brazil. He has worked as a performer and director in the United States and Brazil, and has taught performance to prisoners and underprivileged youth through People's Palace Projects in Rio de Janeiro and Community Works in San Francisco. He holds a bachelor's degree in Theatre Studies and Anthropology from Yale University.

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Phone: (202) 364-4068
Fax: (202) 364-0498
E-mail: icwa@icwa.org
Web site: www.icwa.org