

The universities and dissent: Some cautionary lessons



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HOPEFULLY, by the time this article appears in print good sense will have prevailed and the teachers and students of Dhaka University will have been released from jail. I am writing this in anticipation that some lessons have been learnt and that such a pointless and regrettable episode will not repeat itself during the remaining tenure of the caretaker government (CTG).

Since most, if not all, members of the CTG have been students at Dhaka University they should know something about the climate of dissent, which characterises universities in general and Dhaka University in particular. Universities are a place where young and old think, argue and periodically disagree with the established order.

In the turbulent history of the subcontinent, political movements have been incubated in the universities, and the campus has been a source of resistance to established authority. From the Language Movement to the Liberation War Dhaka University has been at the vanguard of resistance to the suppression of democratic rights. Such movements have periodically invoked official repression (1952), regime inspired violence (1960s) and, eventually, the prelude to the genocide of 1971.

A politically conscious and articulate university campus is an integral feature of a strong civil society. Politics on the campus has, thus, been an essential instru-

ment in the democratic struggle of South Asia, and particularly in Bengal. The university or college campus brings together a small but more politically conscious segment of the population in one place, which facilitates collective action.

This is advantageous for political activism, particularly where political parties command limited organisational reach, as tends to be the case in many Third World countries. I remember making this same, rather unoriginal observation, when I was invited in 1961 to give evidence before the Justice Hamoodur Rahman Commission on the university system in Pakistan. The good justice was particularly exercised by the salience of politics in Dhaka University, but surprisingly appeared to lack any understanding of the dynamics of politics in East Bengal.

The Commission's report inspired the government of East Pakistan to pass an order barring university teachers from participating in politics. This order was challenged in the East Pakistan High Court by Professor Abdur Razzaq, one of Dhaka University's most venerated teachers. His case was argued by Pakistan's most eminent jurist, A.K. Brohi, assisted by Dr. Kamal Hossain as his junior, before a Bench presided over by Justice Mahub Murshed, which eventually upheld the right of university teachers to participate in politics. Teachers such as myself became a beneficiary of this judgement. Otherwise, we might have had to choose between our careers at Dhaka University and our right to exercise dissent.

It is unthinkable that teachers or students in Dhaka, or any other, university would not regularly express themselves on the political issue of the day. As a young teacher of Dhaka University, I was one of those who expressed himself through writings in the media or in various academic and public fora, on a variety of subjects of a

political nature. My views were rarely to the taste of successive regimes in Pakistan.

My first paper on two economies, which has since earned me some notoriety, was presented when I was a 26 years old teacher at Dhaka University, at a seminar in Lahore in October 1961, convened by the Bureau of National Reconstruction. Pakistan was then experiencing its first exposure to Martial Law under Field Marshal Ayub Khan. My session was chaired by a judge of the West Pakistan High Court, who was appalled by my implied assault on the integrity of Pakistan, and by the concluding suggestion that if nothing was done to correct the deprivation of East Pakistan, two economies may end up as two nations. The justice enquired from a friend who had accompanied me to the meeting as to whether I was aware that Pakistan was under Martial Law and that my speech were potentially treasonable!

Those of us teachers at Dhaka University in the 1960's, who expressed themselves on public issues, were rarely conscious of the consequences of our writings and utterances. We were, thus, honoured by recognition in the intelligence files of the Home Department. But I was never invested with the privilege of being arrested, in spite of my rather well publicised writings and utterances against the policies of the government. Nor were any other university teachers arrested during the two tenures of Martial Law, and even during the notoriously oppressive regime of Governor Momen Khan in the 1960s.

Indeed, since the arrest of Professors Munier Chowdhury, Muzaffer Ahmed Chowdhury and others in the wake of the 1952 Language Movement, no university teacher, to the best of my knowledge, was arrested by the government of Pakistan; although NSF hoodlums, patronised by the Monem Khan regime and the Vice

Chancellor of Dhaka University, severely assaulted Dr. Abu Mahmood, Chairman of the Department of Economics and Professor Shamsuzzoha was killed in a firing at Rajshahi University during the movement against the Ayub regime in 1969.

The most conspicuous attempt to arrest teachers and eventually murder them began with the genocide initiated by the Pakistani army in March 1971. After all my confrontations with successive regimes in Pakistan, from 1961 to 1971, the first time anyone came to arrest me was on the afternoon of March 27, 1971, when a squad of the Pakistan army, led by a Col. Saeeduddin, who had earlier arrested Bangabandhu from his home in Road No. 32 on the night of March 25, came to my Gulshan residence to take me away to the cantonment.

As evidence came in of the massacre at Dhaka University I had been advised by friends to leave my residence that morning, after the curfew had been lifted. Had the Pakistan army come for me 24 hours earlier they would have found me at home, along with every other teacher of Dhaka University. None of us, even at that late hour, thought we might be detained, let alone subjected to execution, which awaited Professors Guha Thakurta, G.C. Deb, Maniruzzaman and others, who were all staying at home in their campus flats, as the genocide unfolded around them. Some other teachers of Dhaka University, who stayed on at campus during 1971, were picked up by the Pakistan military or their local collaborators, and a number of these teachers never returned home alive.

I have provided this short biography to educate contemporary readers and policymakers to the fact that upto March 26, 1971, the ground rules of an autocratic and oppressive regime, twice operating under Martial Law, left university teachers immune from arrest.

This awareness invested teachers with a false sense of security upto that fateful night in March 1971, which cost some of them their lives. 98% of teachers at Dhaka and other universities at that time and even today do not say anything, or say little to generate sleeplessness amongst our rulers.

The few who did speak out with varying degrees of provocation were never deemed to be a sufficient threat to the state to warrant their detention. The carrot rather than the stick was always seen by the Pakistan government as a more effective weapon to deal with teachers. This suggests that our Pakistani rulers had a greater sense of their own power to be unduly disturbed by the writings of academics. It may not have been very flattering to the sense of self-esteem of young firebrand teachers who spoke our mind, that we were never deemed worthy of arrest.

The ruling elite reckoned correctly that the real challenge to their power always originated from the political parties whose leaders and workers were periodically subjected to detention and other acts of oppression.

This tradition of dealing with university teachers as licensed critics, who could be denied the carot but rarely exposed to the stick, was perpetuated in post-liberation Bangladesh under the militarised regimes of Ziaur Rahman and H M Ershad, as well as the political regimes, so that few if any teachers were exposed to arrest throughout this period. This history of the treatment of teachers under various regimes does not imply that such regimes were paragons of liberalism, but reflects on their notions of threat perception.

It is argued that it was only when the regime really felt threatened, such as by a national uprising, where even teachers were seen as part of a wider political struggle as in 1971, that pro-active university teachers lost their sense

of immunity from arrest. When a regime feels compelled to arrest teachers it, thus, reflects on their own sense of self-assurance and indicates the weakness rather than the strength of the regime.

Today, when teachers are being arrested, perhaps for the first time since 1952, is their rhetoric more incendiary than those of the teachers of the 1960s, '70s, '80s and '90s? Have our teachers graduated from talkers and scribblers into political organisers capable of instigating acts of violence by their students or anyone else?

With all due respect to their oratorical and literary skills, the evidence filed against the teachers currently in detention, suggests not. All that the teachers are accused of was speaking out against Emergency Rule. If it is a crime, which warranted arrest, to speak against Martial Law, or the incumbency of a particular regime, I would have spent quite a few years of my teaching career in the 1960s, in detention.

Certainly, in the 1960s students came to me for guidance on how they should argue their case politically against the undemocratic and militarised ruling junta's from West Pakistan. I offered such advice freely to the students. But neither did I suggest nor was I asked, how to organise violent dissent against the regime of the day for the simple reason that I lacked competence in this area, no matter how many books I had read by Chairman Mao and Che Guevara on the mechanics of armed struggle.

Again, I doubt if those teachers in detention today have offered or were requested by their students to offer, advice on making fire-bombs or the technology of stone throwing. In such circumstance, to criminalise university teachers for voicing dissent, whatever may be the prevailing laws, appears to be not only unjust but ineffectual and could prove costly to the CTG in the days ahead.

There is much that is wrong

with our universities today. Student politics has been largely held captive by leaders who function more as armed businessmen and janissaries for their favoured political party rather than as political activists serving a cause. The tradition of student leadership set by Abdur Razzaq, Sirajul Alam Khan, Rashed Khan Menon, Motia Chowdhury, Tofail Ahmed, Mujahidul Islam Selim and many others like them, which empowered the students of Dhaka University to play a vanguard role in democratic politics, may be much weaker today. But there are many students today who are also aware of the state affairs in the country, have strong views and emotions on various subjects and, when offered the opportunity or given a provocation, are likely to express themselves on such issues in a variety of ways, mostly but not always, peacefully.

In the same way, the partisanisation of the teaching community may have perpetuated their political divisions, compromised the professionalism of the recruitment and career advancement process of the teachers, and impacted adversely on the quality of public education. As part of this partisanisation of the campus, some university teachers may have identified themselves with one or another political party. But it would be wrong to believe that all teachers have politically affiliated themselves for career advancement.

Many have chosen political sides out of strongly felt political feelings, which reflect the ideological fault lines which today divide the Bangladesh polity. Most teachers, however, do not have clear political affiliations though many do have political views and will occasionally express them where the occasion demands. In such circumstances, it is best to recognise the campus as an arena where dissent will be registered by teachers and students. Some of this dissent may be motivated or insti-

gated from outside the campus. But much dissent will be spontaneous, originating in genuine concerns, whether indigenous to campus affairs or inspired by outside events. This space for dissent within the campus should always be left open, lest such voices go underground and engage themselves in rather more sinister forms of resistance.

In spite of the best efforts of the CTG Bangladesh continues to face a variety of problems, such as rising prices, power shortages, even corruption, which will extend beyond the capacity and tenure of the CTG to resolve. The longer they stay in office the more political decisions will have to be taken by them. It will, therefore, be sensible for the CTG to recognise that in the days ahead, public dissatisfaction will be voiced on the persistence of such problems and the political implications of their actions. Some of this discontent will spill over into dissent on the campus. It will be a measure of the maturity of the CTG as to how it handles such dissent.

It is hoped that Emergency Powers will be lifted soon so that dissent may be openly expressed without invoking official wrath. However, even if Emergency Powers prevail, it should not be misused to suppress expressions of dissent, in print or vocally, or particularly if registered in-house or on-campus and is peacefully manifested.

Regimes, which engage in political actions cannot expect to be immune from criticism or to be held accountable for their acts of commission or omission. An effective system of governance needs to ensure that all governments, whether elected or unelected, permanent or interim, civilian or militarised, always remain exposed to such challenges otherwise a nation degenerates into mal-governance and eventually tyranny.

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Special prayers for our government

MARTIN ADHIKARY

CHRISTIANS observe January 18-25 as the Octave of special prayers. Prayers are held in churches all over the world for justice, peace and overall human progress throughout the world. This movement of Global Prayer was started in a Chapel in New York, USA, in 1908 by an Anglican clergyman, the Reverend Paul Watson. This year is its centennial. Like in other countries, Christians in Bangladesh are also observing this Octave through praises to God, prayers for each other and for the country, the people and the especially for the caretaker government.

We offer special prayers for our present government, the president, the chief adviser, the advisers, and different branches of the government -- the Election Commission, the Anti-Corruption Commission, and the armed forces -- at this critically important time in our national life.

Everyone knows that the CTG has a sacred mandate to fulfill: the mandate of leading the country and the citizens towards, and facilitating the entire process of the holding of, a general election to be held this year. Needless to say, we respect our government and, as such, we pray for them so that they experience the strength, and depend on the counsel and wisdom, of the Almighty Creator and Sustainer in performing their job and delivering the result of their hard labour.

The teeming millions of our people, whose future depends largely on the good performance of the government, are enthusiastically waiting for such a thing as that. However, I might be allowed to refer to some ancient words of wisdom in this connection and illustrate the point that the functions and responsibilities of any government and leadership in human space, irrespective of time and society, are highly sacred.

This very fact, in turn, also points out the democratic values

and principles, spirit of good citizenship, patriotism, and the timeless quality of consideration for others to be believed, internalised and practiced by all people of good-will and manners. To quote from the Holy Bible: "Everyone must submit himself to the government authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The

also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue, if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour (New Testament, Romans 13)."

If we minutely study this Revelation passage we cannot

sovereign country.

We paid a high price for our freedom. But we must remember, as Wendell Phillips had said: "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." Every person in the country, whether in the public, private or government sector, needs to value the liberty and freedom that we have always wished to experience. The present government has not been able to bring down the prices of daily necessities within the limit of the general public. That has been one of its failures. Our earnest prayer and hope is that it will address this issue with top priority.

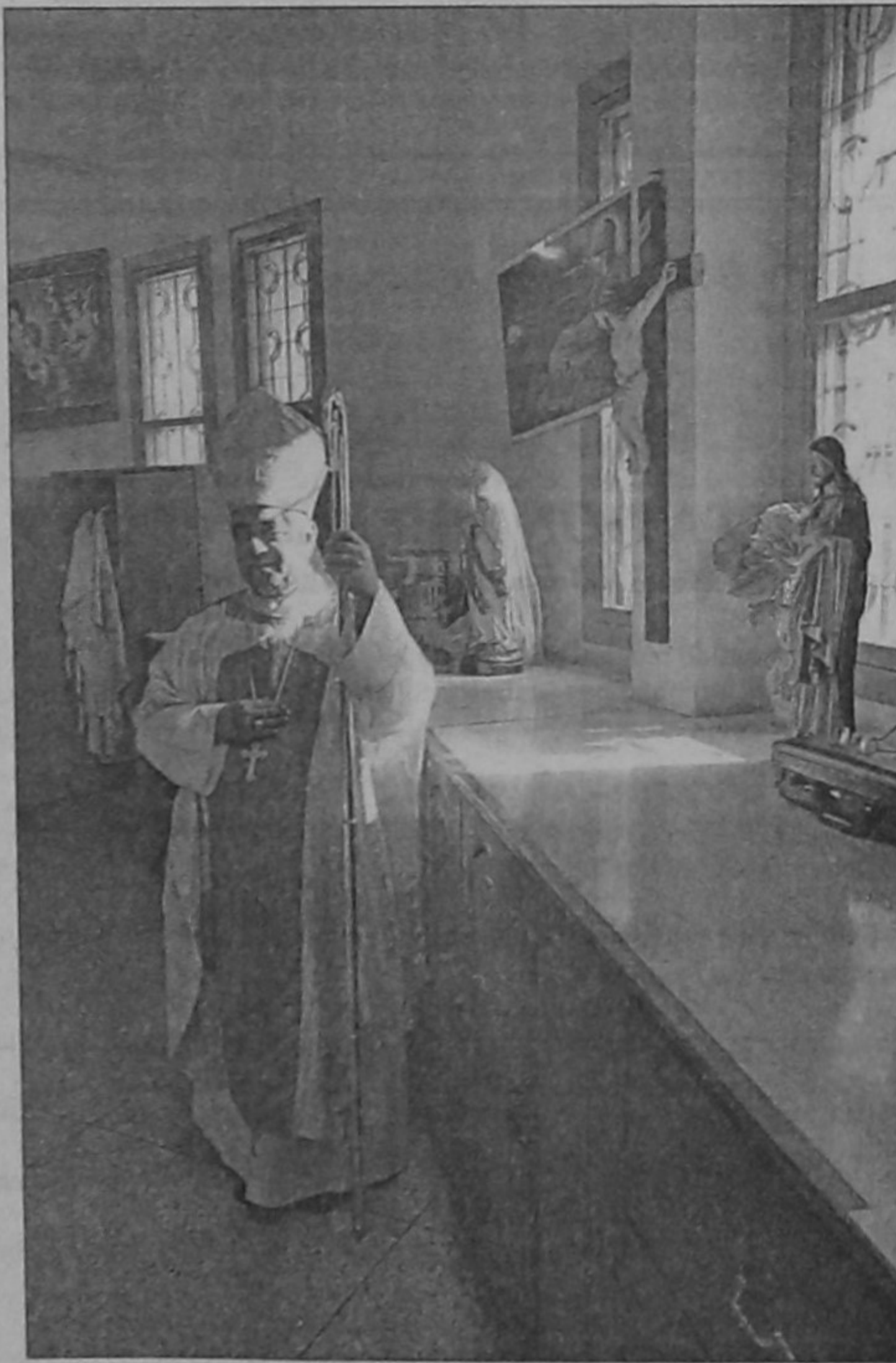
The Constitution of country has been amended several times since 1972 to suit the vested interests of some people wielding authority and power, with utter disregard of the people. Bangladesh is a Republic. The word, when used to refer to a state, implies that it is the people of the country who are most important.

Republic (re-public) implies that some people will be chosen or elected or appointed by the people to represent them, and also be accountable to them for the tasks and responsibilities given to them to perform or bear. That's their raison de etre.

This year, the most crucial time in the life of the present government, let us sincerely pray for the success of the government. As we pray, we must also pay attention to the fact that all of us, as citizens of the country, have our own roles to play so that we can help the government and our fellow citizens to jointly create and maintain the spirit of patriotism.

Let us mutually encourage one another for the creation of a better future for country, for new visions and dream for a society to be characterised by just peace where every person will live with dignity, and dream of a better future for ourselves and for our children.

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MUNIR UZ ZAMAN/OLYMPIA NEWS

authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you, for he is God's servant to do you good. This is

escape the fact that there is no alternative to mutual trust and respect, or obedience, between the people and the government authority. The government represents people, and it must do so as it has the sacred trust and mandate to fulfill the hopes and aspirations of the people, and, in turn, the people should obey the government so long as it does not disrespect them, and ought to strive to sincerely do what is good for them as citizens of a free and

al-Qaeda's newest triggerman

SAMI YOUSAFZAI AND RON MOREAU

HOW do you track down a foe without a face? That is the challenge posed by Baitullah Mehsud, the man who could well be the newest Enemy No. 1 in the war on terror. Since he first emerged as a young jihadist leader three years ago, the black-bearded and slow-talking tribal leader has maintained his Mehsud clan's mountainous badlands in the northwest corner of Pakistan into a safe haven for Al Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban and outlawed Pakistani jihadists.

Though uneducated, and only in his mid-30s, Baitullah snookered Pakistani leader Pervez Musharraf into a fake peace deal two years ago -- and even got him to hand over a few hundred thousand dollars. Just as important, Baitullah has learned the hard lessons of previous jihadists who grew too enamored of the spotlight for their own good.

According to Afghan Taliban who know him, he travels in a convoy of pickups protected by two dozen heavily armed guards, he rarely sleeps in the same bed twice in a row, and his face has never been photographed. They say his role model is Mullah Mohammed Omar, the equally mysterious Taliban leader who disappeared from view in 2001.

US officials have distanced themselves somewhat from the Pakistani government's swift -- perhaps too swift -- conclusion that Baitullah was behind the December 27 assassination of Benazir Bhutto. The slain former prime minister's Pakistan Peoples Party also disputed that claim, pointing the finger instead at figures within the government. Even Musharraf toned down previous statements from his own officials definitively assigning blame to Baitullah, and late last week he invited Scotland Yard to help with the investigation.

Still, most US experts agree that Baitullah is the most likely culprit. Musharraf told a press conference last Friday that the tribal leader was behind most if not all of the 19 suicide bombings in Pakistan, including the two aimed at Bhutto, in the past three months. "He is the only one who had the capacity," says one Afghan Taliban with close connections to Mehsud, Al Qaeda and Pakistani militants. (The source, who has proved reliable in the past,

would speak only if his identity were protected.)

Last week the Pakistani government produced an intercept in which it claims Baitullah was heard telling a militant cleric after Bhutto's murder: "Fantastic job. Very brave boys, the ones who killed her." Pakistani and US authorities now fear that Baitullah, encouraged by the chaos that followed Bhutto's assassination, will try to wreak more havoc before the rescheduled February 18 national elections.

The Afghan Taliban source claims that Baitullah and his Qaeda allies had laid out remarkably intricate plans for killing Bhutto, who was a champion of secular democracy and a declared enemy of the jihadists. He says Baitullah and Al Qaeda's No. 2, Ayman Al-Zawahiri -- along with Zawahiri's deputy, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, Al Qaeda's new commander of military operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan -- had dispatched suicide-bomber squads to five cities: Karachi, Peshawar, Lahore, Islamabad and Rawalpindi, where she was killed.

Their orders were to follow Bhutto with the aim of assassinating her if an opportunity presented itself. (Two US counterterrorism officials, who asked for anonymity when discussing the investigation, say there are growing indications of Baitullah's involvement in the assassination.)

Baitullah and his allies have even grander plans, the Afghan source says. Her assassination is only part of Zawahiri's long-nurtured plan to destabilize Pakistan and Musharraf's regime, wage war in Afghanistan, and then destroy democracy in other Islamic countries such as Turkey and Indonesia.

Baitullah's alleged emergence as the triggerman in this grand scheme illustrates the mutability of the jihadist enemy since 9/11. As recently as June 2004, Iraq was said to be Al Qaeda's main battleground, and Abu Mubass al-Zarqawi was the terror chief then whom US authorities worried about most. Baitullah was then a largely unknown subcommander in South Waziristan. But that same month, a US Hellfire missile killed Nek Mohammed, the young, dashing and publicity-hungry tribal leader in Waziristan.

Al Qaeda and tribal militants promoted the young Baitullah to a command position. His equally

young Mehsud clansman, Abdullah Mehsud -- a one-legged jihadist who had recently been released from two years of detention in Guantanamo -- also seemed to be a rising star. But after the botched kidnapping of two Chinese engineers working on a dam in the tribal area, a local council backed by Al Qaeda removed Abdullah and replaced him with the little-known Baitullah, who was seen as being more level-headed. (Abdullah was later killed in a shoot-out.)

Since then, Zarqawi has been killed by US forces, Iraq has receded as a haven for Al Qaeda, and Baitullah has come into his own as a terrorist leader in newly unstable Pakistan. Last month a council of militant leaders from the tribal agencies and neighboring areas named Baitullah the head of the newly formed Taliban Movement in Pakistan, a loose alliance of jihadist organizations in the tribal agencies.

Taliban sources who would speak only on condition of anonymity describe Baitullah as a key middleman in the jihadist network: his tribesmen provide security for Al Qaeda's rough-hewn training compounds in the tribal area as well as foot soldiers for Qaeda-designed attacks. With a long tradition as smugglers, the tribals (most of whom, like Baitullah, take Mehsud as their surname) run an extensive nationwide trucking and transport network that reaches from the borderlands into teeming cities like Karachi, allowing Baitullah to easily move men and weapons throughout Pakistan.

Baitullah has clearly outsmarted the unpopular Musharraf, whom President George W. Bush praised again last week as an "ally" who "understands clearly the risks of dealing with extremists and terrorists." In February 2005, with his military getting bloodied in the tribal areas, the Pakistani president decided to strike a peace deal with Baitullah and other militant leaders and their frontmen.

Under the terms of the deal the militants agreed not to provide assistance or shelter to foreign fighters, not to attack government forces, and not to support the Taliban or launch cross-border operations into Afghanistan. As part of the deal, Baitullah coaxed the government into giving him and the other leaders \$540,000 that they supposedly owed to Al Qaeda.

The large cash infusion bol-

stered the jihadist forces, and under cover of the ceasefire Baitullah's territory became an even more secure safe haven. He and other militant leaders have assassinated some 200 tribal elders who dared to oppose them. The Pakistani government struck a similar peace agreement with militants in North Waziristan in September 2006, transforming much of that tribal area into a militant camp as well.

One of Baitullah's biggest successes came in August, when his men captured more than 250 Pakistani soldiers and paramilitary troops, who surrendered without firing a shot. Musharraf demanded the release of 30 jailed militants and the end of Pakistani military operations in the Mehsud tribal area as the price for the men's release. To show he meant business, he ordered the beheading of three of his hostages.

Once again, Musharraf gave in. On the day after Musharraf declared a state of emergency -- which he claimed was aimed at giving him a stronger hand to fight militants like Baitullah -- the Pakistani president released 25 jailed insurgents including several failed suicide bombers. Last week Mehsud's forces captured four more Pakistani paramilitary troops in several brazen operations that may have led to the death of 25 of his men.

In his few statements to the press, Baitullah has made his agenda frighteningly clear. He vowed, in a January 2007 interview, to continue waging a jihad against "the infidel forces of American and Britain," and to "continue our struggle until foreign troops are thrown out" of neighboring Afghanistan.

He knows he's a marked man: "The Angel of Death is flying over our heads all the time," he told the now deceased Taliban leader Mullah Akhund Dadullah at a dinner, according to one senior Taliban source. But from his secure corner of Pakistan -- a country run by a widely despised autocrat who, after Bhutto, has few real democratic successors -- Baitullah may well wage that fight for a long time to come.

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