

Shortly after Zardari's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and its coalition partner in the northwest of Pakistan, Awami National Party (ANP), signed a peace deal agreeing to the implementation of sharia law in the Swat Valley, Zardari unseated the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) government in Pakistan's largest province, the Punjab, and imposed governor rule.

Ironically, both the PPP and the ANP have historically flaunted their commitment to secular ideals. Yet, much like in the case of Musharraf, Zardari's energies are focused on targeting secular political opponents instead of extending the hand of collaboration to politicians across the spectrum in order to defeat the very dangerous enemy that is challenging the writ of the state and poised to impose its own draconian laws by force of the gun.

To be fair to the ANP, its leadership has suffered losses at the hands of the extremists and may well be too scared to further antagonize these ruthless and armed groups who are now terrorizing populations in not just the tribal areas but also settled parts of the northwest province. Yet as several analysts within Pakistan have pointed out, there have been peace negotiations and deals entered into previously with these groups, but they have not achieved lasting peace. And although a military solution is rarely desirable and some sort of political settlement will eventually have to take place, the extremists must lay down their arms and agree to abide by the laws of the state if there is to be a political settlement.

There is little doubt that American drone attacks in parts of Pakistan fuel sympathy for the extremists and create an environment whereby they can coerce concessions from the ruling government. Yet, overwhelmingly Pakistanis are fed up of the terror. Barbaric beheadings, burning of girls' schools, and a general feeling of insecurity has several human rights groups and women activists protesting. Editorials, opinions and especially letters from the affected areas are pouring into newspapers condemning the violence and seeking help.

But the government's priorities seem to be elsewhere. Zardari is too busy consolidating power and obliterating opposition. The imposition of two months of governor rule in Punjab is disturbingly reminiscent of the three-month 'emergency' that Musharraf had imposed in November 2007. Using terrorism as an excuse, Musharraf had proclaimed a state of emergency aimed at annihilating civil society opposition to his removal of the Chief Justice, Iftikhar Chaudhry.

In spite of jailing senior lawyers and several activists who were leading the Chief Justice's case for restoration, Musharraf could not thwart the thirst for a democratic and progressive Pakistan found in large parts of the country, which has been sustained and facilitated by the amazing lawyers' movement. When political opponents joined the lawyers, Musharraf found it difficult to hang on to power. His party was defeated at the February 2008 polls, and contrary to the image of a wild and unruly Pakistan he had been busy painting to the west in his decade of rule, the Pakistanis voted for secular parties

like the PPP and the ANP, not the religiously oriented ones that stood for sharia and jihad.

Having rejected the religious parties at the polls in favour of the secular ones has left many Pakistanis perplexed and severely disturbed that their mandate is being set aside by the government in favour of an alleged peace deal which may result in the imposition of a very rigid interpretation of sharia. On the other hand, what gives the extremists in places like Swat greater reason to push for sharia is the lack of a functioning secular justice system. While the real Chief Justice is still out of a job, a pliant one sits in his place. Nevertheless, the lawyers' movement remains alive today and is not willing to back down. It remains the greatest thorn in Zardari's side.

Much like Musharraf, Zardari offers words of concern for places like Swat but few actions. Actions are reserved for political opponents like the Sharif brothers and their PML, which was doing an administratively decent job of ruling the Punjab until it was derailed a few days ago, and for civil society activists like those involved in the lawyers' movement, who are once again threatening a long march if the real Chief Justice is not restored. The mere thought of the long march has led Zardari to topple the democratically-elected government in Punjab, from where the long march would have commenced.

He has not learned from Musharraf's experience. He cannot suppress an idea whose time has come. He will either have to restore the Chief Justice, Iftikhar Chaudhry, who most Pakistanis look upon as a symbol of justice, or risk Musharraf's fate. There is also a lesson here for the western powers. It is time to let go of partnerships with individuals like Musharraf and Zardari, who cannot deliver on the fight against extremism, and look instead to partner with the Pakistani nation, civil society activists and professionals, who have a far greater stake in the system and want their country to progress and function democratically.

In his inaugural address, President Obama, in addressing the Muslim world, said "we will extend a hand if you are willing to un-clench your fist". It may be too much to ask those who are accustomed to corruption and deceit to un-clench their fists, but how about extending a hand to those who are on the right side of history and who are not willing to back down from their democratic ideals?