

Is Pakistan a failed state?

By Nizar Diamond Ali

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It was late June when I started receiving forwarded emails about Pakistan being ranked number 10 among failed states.

Familiar with the way Pakistan is generally covered by the international media, my initial reaction was to dismiss this piece of information as just another instance of bad press for our country. But this reaction did not go down well with my colleagues, who were adamant that with all that's wrong in Pakistan, it was entirely possible that we were indeed the 10th most failed state on the face of this planet.

I decided to find out the origins and methods used for the ranking. The 'failed state' lists were being quoted widely in the print media and in emails but few questions were being asked about the accuracy and authenticity of the data used, and the criteria applied.

This list, titled the 'Failed State Index' (FSI), was compiled mainly by the Fund for Peace, a non-profit research and educational organization. It was carried as an article by the Foreign Policy magazine with a photo spread of 'failed' countries under the caption 'Postcards from hell'. Note that Foreign Policy is published by the Slate Group, a division of Washington Post.

Newsweek Interactive, which itself is a subsidiary of the Washington Post Company. And it was Newsweek that printed a cover story with the title 'The most dangerous nation in the world isn't Iraq. It's Pakistan' in 2007 (note the use of word 'nation' instead of 'country').

In its list of predictions for 2010, Newsweek predicted a coup in Pakistan, while back in 2004, an issue of the magazine was banned in Pakistan for publishing material that desecrated the Quran. In the western media, Pakistan has continuously been portrayed along the lines of a pariah state and this time too the country was highlighted through the FSI.

Let us first understand the components of this index. Basically, these are indicators collectively termed as the "12 metrics of state decay" grouped under social, economic and political categories. Specifically, these are demographic pressures, refugees or internally displaced persons and group grievances and human flight taken as social indicators. Uneven economic development and economic decline are taken as economic indicators while the de-legitimization of the state, the deterioration of public services, human rights and security apparatus, the rise of factionalized elites and the intervention of other states are considered political factors.

Now comes the interesting question: how is the data populated in these indicators? The online PDF version of this index contains just scores plotted against attributes for each country. The specific method used to deduce these scores from the country source data is not provided. According to the main article at the Foreign Policy site, the data is collected from 90,000 publicly available sources whereas the Fund for Peace site says that the data comes from electronically available sources. It is anybody's guess as to how much of Pakistan's social and political data is available in the public domain or in electronic format. A quick example from everyday life: some of even the best private hospitals in major

metropolitan cities of Pakistan still keep patient data/ medical history in physical files that are brought in from the record rooms before an appointment.

Due to such inconsistencies, indexes such as the FSI can at best be termed as estimates in which biases — including political ones — could creep in due to the selection of indicators combined with the availability and quality of source data, which varies to a great extent from country to country. And since there is no global consensus on the definition of a failed state, comparing apples to apples becomes even more difficult. Just a quick variance factor, for example: Pakistan has been home to the largest refugee population in the world for about two decades, according to the UN refugee agency.

Still, there is a tendency — indeed, a local irony — here for there being many buyers of such reports amongst the general educated public. This, in addition to the silent and indifferent majority, gives added credence to the phenomenon of 'western/ international reports'. It is high time that we as a nation started believing in our strengths (along with recognizing our issues) and began to question the basis of such indexes, instead of trusting them as the last word — perhaps due to our internal frustrations or defeatist mentality.

Our universities can play a great role by promoting awareness, confronting foreign think tanks by asking them to make report data available, perhaps by building up indigenous and better indexes or even coming up with research papers on techniques for cross-country index creation. These are also the objectives of the FSI mentioned on the Fund for Peace's website. We can encourage debate. The spirit of book-for-a-book exemplified by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan's *Khutbat and Taseef* must now be revived.

In a nutshell, there is a need to think critically as to what really constitutes FSI-type reporting, including the motives and potential impact which might include propagating hearsay-based despondency. Jumping to conclusions and going into a frenzy displays our own inherent weaknesses. By contrast, consider how Noam Chomsky is often labelled as controversial for writings such as *Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy* and examining whether the US is itself becoming a failed state.

Despite all the problems, Pakistan is certainly not a failed state. This is evidenced by Pakistan's sustained achievements in national defence, participation in UN peacekeeping missions over the years, growth in the sectors of telecommunications, banking and the electronic media, all the foreign students studying in Pakistani universities and Pakistani professionals working abroad. It is also visible in the national resolve displayed in the wake of the 2005 earthquake and lately, in the institution of the judiciary which has come into the limelight. These are all hallmarks of a nation that has great potential and is not a 'failed state' by any means.

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