

## **Life in and around Peshawar**

**By Jamal Khan**

In NWFP five years of MMA rule (2002-2007) that was preceded by three years of governor rule (dominated by conservative bureaucracy) has pretty much sucked the joy out of living in Peshawar. During this time the economy of the entire province was pretty much stagnated but extremist elements and their sympathizers have gained economic and social strength. In rhetoric MMA's agenda was to introduce an Islamic government in the province but in practice they lacked the know-how and the home work to formulate a policy that could have improved the life of the ordinary citizens in an Islamic welfare system.

During their tenure they stuffed the education department with theology and Arabic teachers in their view that would have improved the education system. They imported bankers from the Middle East to experiment with Islamic banking in the only financial institution of the province, The Bank of Khyber. These bankers failed to create a totally Islamic bank but they succeeded in taking the bank to the brink of bankruptcy.

Over the last five years NWFP was mostly shunned out of over seven percent plus per annum real GDP growth that the rest of country enjoyed. Looking at the abysmal pace of economic progress and development in NWFP over the last eight years one wonders when will the new millennium of prosperity and global economic integration dawn upon this region of the world. The last five years were especially painful as the MMA led government was collectively semiliterate about the structure and necessities of a modern economy. In these five years unemployment skyrocketed, infrastructure deteriorated, investments dried out, and over all economic uncertainty prevailed. Worst of all many parts of the province saw stagflation. (Rising prices with decrease in real income).

MMA members were elected on the promise that they would show more honesty and austerity in government matters than the corrupt politicians that preceded them. In order to insure honest behavior they made prayers mandatory in office hours for government employees. The underlying logic was that pious Muslims make honest government employees. To improve social values they banned female pictures on billboards and banned theater in the province.

During the last eight years many people have migrated out of the province, some immigrated abroad while others settled in other parts of the country. Like the outward migration patterns of early seventies that started with economic boom in the Middle East the crux of this migration was for economic reasons. However for the first time a sizeable number of progressive middle and upper class families left the province due to social suffocation they were enduring in the province. Along with them they took sizeable investments and a wide range of technical skills. Most of them sold their properties. Real estate accumulation is the best mode of investments for smugglers, drug traffickers and others. It is no coincidence that a large chunk of prime commercial and non commercial

property in Peshawar is now owned by drug traffickers who have deep sympathies and links with the extremist causes.

Extremist violence gradually increased through out 2007. CD and video shops and some internet café's were bombed all over the province. Another favorite bombing target was barber shops as they were considered un-Islamic. Most of these bombings took place at night in order to scare the owners of these businesses rather than killing them. When some CD and video rental shop owners in Swat complained of continued harassment by the extremists, the concerned authorities told them to look for a "more respectable and non-controversial businesses" V-Den the oldest and the most well established video and CD rental store in Peshawar was forced to close in late 2007. The store which was frequented by the elite of Peshawar was threatened with dire consequences if it continued operations, a clear sign that the progressive elite of the city have lost their influence to safeguard a place that provided quality entertainment to them over the decades. Dozens of video kiosks in the famous Karkhano market situated on Peshawar-Torkum road also closed down after an overnight bomb destroyed some of them. Al-Qaeda and Taliban propaganda videos are the only CD's they are willing to sell now.

In absence of a strong manufacturing base or a vibrant services industry most of the employment in the private sector and business opportunities in Peshawar are related with cross border trade with Afghanistan. Peshawar-Torkhum-Jalalabad road is the main artery that connects these two countries. Over the last one year traveling on this road has become more hazardous. Recently the Pakistani ambassador to Afghanistan was kidnapped while traveling on this road. Political administration failed to trace his whereabouts. Eye witness accounts suggest that he was kidnapped by around a dozen well armed people dressed like Taliban near the Ali Masjid road on the said high way. He is believed to be taken to the Tirah valley.

On this road going westbound from Peshawar the first town is Jamrud which is part of Khyber Agency of Federally Administrated Tribal Area (FATA). In this town of merchants and smugglers historically businessmen pledged allegiance to the Barelwi spiritual leaders, the Pirs of Landikotal. Lately the deobandi/ wahhabi influence which historically dominated Bara sub district of Khyber agency is now also violently growing in Jamrud and Landikotal sub district of Khyber agency. Traders in Peshawar are extremely worried that a violent clash between the Barelwi Tanzim Ahl-i- Sunnat-wal-Jamaat and the Deobandi Lashkar-i-Islam is now imminent. Such a clash will definitely close the Peshawar-Torkhum highway for weeks.

Bara sub division of Khyber agency is also adjacent to Peshawar. Mangal Bagh, the leader of Laskar-i-islami is the unofficial ruler of this sub district. He gives religious sermons on his own FM radio station, collects donations from opium smugglers and travels in an entourage of over fifty vehicles and three hundred plus body guards. For the last several months he is warning on his FM channel that he will export his strict code of Wahhabi Islam to the surrounding districts including Peshawar. In the first week of



March 2008 Mangal Bagh-led Lashkar-e-Islami raided Shaikhan village on the outskirts of Peshawar where at least 10 people were killed and four houses and the historical Dani Baba shrine (a symbol of Barelwi sect in the region) was demolished.

Indus High way is another important road that connects Peshawar with the port city of Karachi. This is a very important trucking route. Access to the road starts from south west of Peshawar, which goes through the friendship tunnel (built by Japanese aid) in Dara Adam Khel 20 miles from Peshawar. Local Taliban briefly took control of this tunnel in January 2008. When confronted by the Pakistani establishment these retrieving militants unsuccessfully tried to blow up the tunnel. Over the last one year extremists are solidifying their position in Dara and the surrounding hills.

Hayatabad is a modern suburb of Peshawar and amalgamation point for people from different parts of NWFP, FATA and Afghanistan. In the last eight months Hayatabad has seen influx of temporary and permanent middle class migrants from Swat and other parts of Malakand division. In late 2007 Maulana Fazlullah, the head of the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM), along with Jaish-e-Mohammad and foreign militants established partial de facto Islamic rule over Swat. Since then according to government officials “most of these militants have been pushed back from the main towns in Swat by security forces” but tension is still high in the valley and surrounding districts. Girl schools stayed closed for months in Swat and the tourist trade has come to a complete halt.

The inhabitants of Peshawar who are seeing their city on the brink of total chaos are wondering why some one will migrate to Peshawar? Perhaps the situation in Swat is much worse. Meanwhile in Peshawar kidnapping for ransom has reached historical highs. Usually women are not kidnapped in this conservative town but a trader’s wife was kidnapped in February 2008. School children and businessmen are usually the target of kidnapers. The ransom demand is usually pretty steep and the probability of law enforcement agencies recovering the kidnapped person is very low.

Not only the law in order situation in the province is bad but the entire administrative structure of the province is near collapse. Effective governance is not possible with out major reforms. Sensing this problem the governor of the province has established the offices of regional coordination officers (RCOs). These officers will be in charge of geographic regions that will include some parts of NWFP and its adjacent tribal areas (FATA). These cosmetic changes will not go very far.

One veteran politician summed the condition of the city nicely “Today this city (Peshawar) looks like Kabul in the final years of Najibullah rule (Early nineties). The extremists are closing in from all sides, world powers are playing their games, Wahhabis are desecrating graves, bomb blasts in and around the city are almost a daily routine, vital supply lines to and from the city are under constant threat, foreign extremists are close by in the mountains and there is total collapse in the administrative structure. People are desperate for a change, they are hoping for the best but it can be a lot worse”.

