

**DRONE GROAN:** Pakistan-US relations plunged to a new low after NATO helicopters and combat aircraft attacked two Pakistani military border posts in the restive Mohmand tribal region, killing 24 soldiers



# PAKISTAN ON THE BOIL

Crippling floods for the second year running, a sputtering economy, high inflation and rising unemployment and a devastating breakdown in relations with the United States defined the year for Pakistan

By Hasan Zaidi

**S**AYING that 2011 was a difficult year for Pakistan might actually win some sort of prize for understatement. This was a year that began with the cold-blooded assassination by a religious fanatic (and member of the security detail) of the governor of the country's most populous province and ended with speculation rife that the powerful military was once again plotting to send an elected civilian government packing.

The murder of liberal and outspoken Punjab Governor Salman Taseer — who was killed by his police security guard because he spoke in favour of a Christian woman on the death row under the country's notorious blasphemy laws — probably produced less shockwaves than the subsequent lionisation of his killer by some segments of society.

Evidence of this rise of unabashed bigotry in society was further solidified when it claimed the life of the federal minorities minister Shahbaz Bhatti even as the ruling Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) was roundly criticised for not showing enough spine in the face of open threats from extremists. By the end of the year, however, it was the PPP that was crying foul over the motives of an activist Supreme Court hearing cases of corruption that still threaten to destabilise the government.

In between such markers of rising intolerance and intrigue, Pakistan also witnessed crippling floods for the second year running, a sputtering economy, high inflation and rising unemployment and a devastating breakdown in relations with the United States. There was also increasingly fractious provincial politics, continuing militancy and conflict particu-

larly in the tribal areas, the killing of 11 journalists, the periodic turning up of bodies of summarily executed Baloches who had earlier disappeared, the conviction by a London court of three of its cricketers in a spot-fixing scam and a controversy over a secret memo sent to the American government that has already led to Pakistan's ambassador to the US being forced to resign.

The warning of ties between Pakistan and India — Pakistan tentatively promised its neighbour the long sought for Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status and India acknowledged a drawdown in militant incursions into Kashmir — were overshadowed by other developments in the region. The friction between the US (increasingly desperate to find a way out of the Afghan quagmire) and Pakistan (increasingly upset at being taken for granted) probably has the most far-reaching geopolitical consequences. It first came to the fore with the arrest in Lahore of an American intelligence contractor Raymond Davis who had shot dead two men. The dust had barely settled on that affair — finally resolved through the payment of blood money — when the world's most wanted man, Osama bin Laden, was discovered and killed by American marines in a daring raid right next to a military academy in Abbottabad. As questions swirled about the complicity or incompetence of Pakistan's intelligence agencies, nationalist rhetoric reached fever-pitch on both sides. The US attack on a Pakistani border post in November that killed 24 soldiers, and which the Pakistani military believed was a testing of the waters for further incursions into Pakistani territory, finally



**NIGHT RAIDERS:** US President Barack Obama watches real-time video of special forces killing Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad

drove relations to the breaking point. Pakistan, having pulled out of a crucial conference on Afghanistan and blocked NATO supply routes, now demands a redefinition of its terms of engagement with the US even as the US reconsiders its financial assistance.

Meanwhile, domestically, the plunging popularity of President Asif Zardari and the continuing unpopularity of his main rival Nawaz Sharif with the country's military establishment, has spurred the rising star of perennial outsider Imran Khan who held a political career-defining massive rally in Lahore in October. Even as the country gears up for an early

election next year previously aloof politicians rush to jump on Khan's bandwagon. Those threatened by the former cricket captain's surging popularity accuse him of having the secret backing of the intelligence services.

Whether he does or not, the stand-off with the US, which has stoked patriotic sentiment, and a mismanaged economy that has tainted the government have ensured that military chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani once again holds the cards to Pakistan's future.

That is a far cry from the public opprobrium heaped on him and his institution on May 2, the day after bin Laden was killed.

## General trouble

Loss of face for Pak army, and NATO drone attacks kept Af-Pak simmering



**ARM TWISTING:** General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani

By Syed Nooruzzaman

**T**HE Pakistan army's role found frequent mention in the midst of speculation over the fate of President Asif Zardari after he flew to Dubai recently all of a sudden, ostensibly for medical reasons. Most reports indicated that the army was about to take over the administration. Some other reports had it that Zardari was under pressure to relinquish power because of his unhappy relationship with his army chief. Whatever the truth, one thing is clear: under the prevailing circumstances, the army cannot afford to stage another coup to dislodge the elected government in Islamabad.

The Pakistan army has suffered considerable loss of face during the past few years. Its action to end the siege of Islamabad's Lal Masjid made it unpopular because of the manner in which it was used for the purpose by the then military ruler of Pakistan, Gen Pervez Musharraf. This led to frequent suicide bomb attacks. Those involved were tribal youngsters from Waziristan and the surrounding areas. They took the extremist path as most of the madrasah students who perished in the Lal Masjid army operation were tribals.

In the process, however, the Taliban movement got strengthened. The extremists began to demonstrate that they were law unto themselves by issuing their own do's and don'ts to the public. They posed a serious threat to peace and security not only in Pakistan but also in the rest of South Asia and beyond.

This led to tremendous international (read US) pressure on Pakistan to get tough with the Taliban and other terrorist groups. Initially, the Pakistan army was reluctant, but a stage came when it had to launch a drive, though half-heartedly, to tame the extremists. However, this did not win the masses than to the Taliban and its associates. The Pakistan army was accused of killing its own people.

The primary reason for the situation that came to prevail was Pakistan's unwise policy. It wanted to allow pro-Islamabad Taliban groups to prosper and punish those not listening to the government's dictates. The friendly Taliban factions were considered "strategic assets" to be used for achieving Pakistan's geopolitical objectives in Afghanistan. The world community could not tolerate all this. Hence the US drone attacks in Pakistan's tribal areas with the undeclared cooperation of the Pakistan army. People gradually came to know of the duplicity in the behaviour of their army and the result was more distrust and anger against Pakistan's armed forces.

The army got further exposed when "memogate" came to light. "Memogate" resulted in the removal of Ambassador Hussain Haqqani, who was reported to have sent a note to a retired US American military official through a US-based Pakistani lobbyist with an alleged request from President Asif Zardari to prevent an imminent army coup. This was enough for the army to dislodge the government, but it had no courage to do so because of what had been happening in the past, disparaging its image in the eyes of the public.

In view of the raging anti-Americanism in almost every segment of society, Islamabad took a tough stand against the US following the killing of 24 Pakistani army personnel in an attack by NATO troops in November, yet it appeared confused. After a few days Islamabad declared that, as a matter of defence policy, any aircraft, including US drones, violating Pakistan's airspace, would be shot down. The extremist forces had been waiting for such a denouement. This will provide them an excellent opportunity to regroup themselves. Their ideological brothers on the other side of the Durand Line, who have already been feeling upbeat with the planned withdrawal of the US-led NATO troops having begun, are also bound to get emboldened. Thus, the security scenario in the Af-Pak area remains as disturbing as it was in the past.

## NEWSPICK

### The Philippines tragedies

The Philippines was hit by a couple of typhoons in quick succession in December. More than 400 persons were killed, 800,000 affected, nearly 45,000 were left homeless or were missing after typhoons hit Philippines. Typhoon Nansi, with winds gusting up to 90km/h, hit the island of Mindanao in the southern Philippines, while the central Philippines was affected by landslides triggered by Typhoon Durian.



### Sealed with a Royal kiss

Prince William married his long-time girlfriend Kate Middleton in a historic fairytale ceremony at the majestic Westminster Abbey marked by pomp and pageantry as huge crowds and a global TV audience watched Britain's biggest royal wedding in 30 years. William, the second in line to the throne, and Middleton were pronounced man and wife as they exchanged wedding vows with two simple words "I will" before Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams. The bride was wearing a stunning ivory gown with lace applique floral detail, while William, 28, was attired in the red tunic of an Irish Guards Colonel. Middleton, 29, is the first "commoner" to marry a prince in close proximity to the throne in more than 350 years.

### Death of bin Laden

Al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden, the face of global terrorism, was killed in a US military operation at a fortified compound, near Islamabad. Leader's death comes almost 10 years after Al-Qaida's attacks on the World Trade Center's twin towers in New York City and the Pentagon, that killed nearly 3,000 persons.

