

Crossing Sapphires over Pakistan Border

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3rd week of November 2008

All my life Economist, Time or FT have been describing Pakistan as a all-in-one source of troubles: traditional disputes with India alongside Kashmir border, chronicle disagreements with an Afghanistan demanding land until the Indus River, constant wars in North and South Waziristan, earthquakes in North-West-Frontier-Province or violent piracy in the Arabian Sea, coming second after Indonesia in ships takeover.

It is as well a fact that the raw majority of journalists writing these articles are American or European. Eventually they grow up in Zone 1 and play tennis on weekends. Almost for sure, they have never lived in the region and when they do, relying on expatriates' visions, think tank analysis or embassies' lobbies usually comes as the best time-for-money solution to catch up with local reality. Finally they are trying to capture the attention of the western readers.

An unbeatable panacea for these authors would be to meet common people from the region and to dig deep into Pakistan culture and history. When you finally listen to their reasons, have their company for lunch or join a local cricket match, hard opinions will soften. You can even find practical evidence of more balance and respect when you listen to their regional neighbours or read their analysis in India Times, Dubai 7 Days or Singapore Business.

In Pakistan I would get to know that donkey races in Karachi are great, that families in Sialkot are hardworking and humble, and that Lahore, alongside with Marrakech and Istanbul, are the most monumental towns I have seen outside Europe. Moreover, I bet that food in Baluchistan countryside is tastier than most of, say, London or Oslo-based restaurants. I would understand that lot's of Pakistanis are pro-west, peaceful and addicted to Bollywood movies. Moreover, I would simply discover that the reason why four fifths of the population is currently against government's position of being an ally of America's strategy in the region is rational and legitimate: Taliban's fight both by the army or US secret raids almost always fail to protect natives in Federally Administered Tribal Areas and strike back ultimately results in kidnappings or killings in the rest of the country, such as Benazir Bhutto assassination or the bomb in Islamabad Marriott on the 20th of September that killed 53 people and wounded more than 300. Any such new event brings the rupee to a new low originating higher food prices making poor people even poorer. Political risk comes to a new high, decreasing local and foreign investment as well as setting a natural cap to international trade:

__The revenge against American attacks is after all against innocent people in this very country. The west never suffers, nor their companies… When transaction costs increase I must reflect that in even lower wages since for my clients prices are what they want, otherwise they buy in Bangladesh—says Adil, a friend from the industrial town of Sialkot that studied with me at the London School of Economics and who I discover to be a local tycoon nowadays producing hockey sticks, football shoes and that sort of stuff, detaining control of more than 70 companies…

__Who are your customers anyway?

__Well… Nike, Adidas and many others… I and my father are running a lot of companies together. Anyway, it’s hard to make business in turmoil.

Violence Explained

Now that divergences with India over Kashmir calmed down, all we listen in the news is about the Taliban and Al-Qaeda moves all over the country and its settlement in the NWFP namely in North and South Waziristan. That area is Pashtu land and it belongs to their tribes, which have always maintained their territory safe and free from the Talibans. Why so much violent then nowadays?

When the modern state of Pakistan was established in 1947, tribal areas agreed to be part of the country since they could maintain their autonomy and their system of government and justice—which varies from tribe to tribe. Each tribe is ruled by an elder that protects the land with his own army and has never allowed any other army to protect the region.

By the time of the Soviet occupation 2 million Afghans died which led to a strong migratory trend towards Pakistan and Iran. Consequently, many families settled in the tribal areas mixing with the Pashtu's. So when recently the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 turned the game serious, many people from the mountainous region of the tribal areas migrated to the other side of the border to help their Muslim brothers, as well as many Taliban fighters took the other way around entering Pakistan to find shelter and a spot to reorganize their attacks.

As the US troops needed help to kill the Talibans that were hiding in the tribal areas it was asked the government of Pakistan to bring their army into these tribal areas and run a joint war against the terrorism, violating the 1947 agreement. As US target was Iraqi oil from the very beginning US forces were damn scarce in the region. The solution was to offer Pakistan government 12 billion US\$ a year to settle their army in NWFP and fight the Talibans in their turn. Since national Pakistani army was recognized as a foreign invader, the elders led their armies against the national army on one hand thinking they were protecting their tribe from the aggressor and on the other because they simply

couldn't know which army was that. In this context the Taliban grew stronger and ultimately started killing the elders that gave them the original protection. Nowadays they are relevant in the region though some tribes are still independent.

The solution for this structural conflict that damages the reputation of Pakistan throughout the world is: 1. To dialogue with the still independent tribes, building together prosperity and protection into the region, still respecting their way of doing things. For instance, when a kid becomes a man, he receives a gun as an offer, but no one has ever heard of a kiddo starting killing their friends at school. 2. To regain the occupied areas to the Talibans, deploying a strong and organized international force working together with the Pakistan army to bring peace to the region, instead of paying to the national army that sometimes simulates Taliban killings just to justify the money that it is being received.

Moments of a Trip

That was being a strange day in Bombay. In the morning I had had a meeting in the NSE (National Stock Exchange of India Limited) with a senior officer whose name was Mr. Roy Aranha, but in the afternoon I was going to meet Mr. A.R. Coutinho, head of Allwin Securities. Both surnames were totally Portuguese and an empirical signal that 500 years ago Mr. Vasco da Gama and his men really liked the women from India. India has lovely women, great music and food. Girls from the Punjab are renown in south Asia for their extreme beauty. In Bombay I had witnessed the colour festival—the most populated celebration in the whole world—and how investment banking deals never stop in spite of the chaos in the streets. But my time was over and I had to say goodbye to my lunches in the Indigo and to my evenings in the Taj looking at the Gateway of India. The next day I was in Delhi having dinner with Michael Schwarz and 2 Indians that formed his team. Michael was visibly sick, with fever and all that contrast between the air conditioning of the offices and the Tuk-Tuk rides in the tropical rain was killing this German dude. I paid them the dinner while informing that the next day I was going to Pakistan.

I had been informed that the bus to Lahore was escorted by the army and that the line had almost no passengers due to the traditional disputes over Kashmir. This same conflict by the time of the independence led to a mass migration of Sikhs and Indus from the former West Pakistan into India; and of Muslims the other way around. This almost ended circulation of people alongside the border and that subsists until our time. Still, you can find more Muslims in India than in the entire Pakistan—153 M against 150M. For security reasons all passengers were supposed to arrive to the station at 4 A.M. but the trip was only scheduled to commence by 8 A.M. and the bus ended up leaving by 9. All luggage and all the people were carefully controlled. All together there weren't more than 20 passengers but I could bet not all of them made the journey. I only travel with a small bag but a guard discovered a ring full of sapphires that I had one day bought in Agra and that was hidden in the shaving cream.

__Sir, people from Pakistan in the border are bad… they will search your stuff and I swear they will steal you the ring. You have just one option: put it in your finger and say it's a gift from your father…
During the trip I discretely noticed that most of the people including the driver were using rings, so I decided to put the ring in my finger. As the ring was too little I was almost in Amritsar when I finally succeeded. During all the trip there were 2 army cars in the front of the bus and one in behind, going full speed, armed to their teeth, blowing the horn, and keeping distance from other cars with a wooden stick so that no one would get in the way.

I recall that control in Pakistan border was redundant and annoying with so many layers and documents to sign. Conversely, it's maybe more effective than in Lisbon Airport… At a time, a thin guard with a moustache smiled at me and commented:

__Hum, nice ring!

__It was my fathers—l concluded. But I knew that he knew I was lying.

My Pakistani friend Ayesha arranged me a room in Lahore's Country Club: beautiful Victorian buildings and luxurious gardens right in the middle of the town. It was so formal than for me to have breakfast or to go to the tea living I had to wear my linen suit and my Celine tie. There was a very colonial atmosphere in the Millenary City of Lahore. A few centuries ago Lahore was the most important city in south Asia and far more populated than London. During the time I was there I may assure you there were only 3 foreigners in town: a young American teaching English in a private college, a Canadian girl arriving from a humanitarian mission in NWFP, and me.

All Saturdays there were private parties in town, so I went with Ayesha, Mehreen and Bilal to this cool party of someone they knew. It was a modern architecture house with two special but white BMW's parked in the garden. Music was state of the art, the atmosphere was stylish, drinks were great and people had a very good vibe. All of them had been studying in premium schools and working for excellent companies in London and other major markets. Still I knew that was a bias from Pakistan average reality. That evening when I got back to the hotel I noticed I had no water in the room. So I called reception and no one picked up. I was so damn thirsty that I left the room and approached the sleepy guard asking him for water. 2 minutes after that I had the water in my room served in a mineral water fine bottle. I drank it at once. 2 hours after I concluded that the bottle was closed but not sealed when I started sweating as an animal, and my body temperature got up to 42 degrees.

«Diego, focus man, focus», I was thinking, «So he spared himself from crossing all the yard and just put boiled water into a mineral bottle…». I stayed 3 hours more in the hotel. During that time I got insane trying to take the stupid

sapphire ring out of my finger «It's giving me bad luck». Then I called my friends… that were already in the public hospital of Lahore, the only one opened during the night, because Mehreen's mother was having high tension. I don't remember how I left the country club. I vaguely recall Mehreen's family driver grabbing my stuff, leading me into the car and then I woke up just when in the hospital I was given a very strong medicine. I spent the next 3 days in Mehreen's family house where gradually I started to get better. I am so very thankful to this great family that treated me like a son. In my last day in Lahore, Mehreen's family allowed me to assist to a particular wedding celebration of one of Mehreen's cousins that was about to get married. Women from both the families gathered to sing and dance and change flowers at Mehreen's house so that all girls from both families could get to know each other. I was speechless.

The day I returned to India it was Pakistan Independence Day, therefore being India Independence Day. So the bus stopped in the Pakistan side of the border and all people—under very warm sun—had to assist on their feet to a 2 hour celebration before the trip back to Delhi could continue. I would be sick for one more week or so… in that moment I understood the real value of water, Amoxicilin and Clavulanic Acid.