Rural discontent over chronic poverty, corruption, and the failure of the government to foster development is widespread in Pakistan. Land tenure and property rights are one aspect of these problems, undermining economic growth and fueling conflict. Post-independence Pakistan has retained a feudal system of land tenure in which an elite class of landowners owns vast holdings worked by tenant farmers and laborers who live in persistent poverty.

The Taliban is building popular support based in part upon anger over unequal distribution of land and unfair owner-tenant contracts. The insurgents are thus exploiting deep resentment among landless tenants toward “wealthy landlords,”
effectively “engineering a class revolt” with significant implications for the rest of Pakistan (Perlez and Shah 2009).

Poverty and Land in Rural Pakistan

Seventy percent of Pakistan’s population and 74% of Pakistan’s poor live in rural areas; among the rural poor, the incidence of poverty is greatest among agricultural laborers and tenants (Islam 1996). Poverty in Pakistan is strongly correlated with landlessness. According to the World Bank (2009), 2% of households control more than 45% of all land, severely constraining agricultural competitiveness and livelihood opportunities. Anwar et al. (2002) found that poverty is highest (54%) among the landless, noting that only 0.08% of Pakistani households own more than 2 ha of land, and that unequal land distribution is the primary manifestation of poverty in rural Pakistan.

Recent analyses and articles suggest that landlessness, power wielded by the landed class, the government’s inability to administer justice, and disenfranchisement of customary and religious authorities have fostered strong resentment among the rural poor (Bagnash 2009; Escobar 2009; Haq 2009). The articles suggest that the Taliban will gain traction wherever they respond to the grievances of the rural poor and the landless. Plans to address Pakistan’s land tenure regime, land access of the poor, or the security of land rights are notably absent from current plans for development assistance. Addressing these issues will go a long way to mitigating the spread of

Absence of Land and Property Rights as Potential Sources of Conflict and Insurgent Support

The nexus of concentrated power and land ownership, unequal land distribution, and the state’s inability to protect rights of landless has been a source of popular
discontent and support for insurgent movements in countries throughout the world. Biswanger et al. (2005) provide numerous examples where incomplete and failed land tenure reforms were a source of populist discontent and subsequent revolt. They note that while policies that create and maintain inequitable land ownership may not necessarily lead to violent struggle, they clearly played a significant role in many cases (Biswainges et al., 34). They warn that “the social costs of failing to reform have often included peasant uprisings and civil war” (ibid., 31) and cite Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Peru as examples where discontent over land tenure and ownership was a significant factor in popular support for insurgents. Conflict over land ownership and distribution has also played a significant role in recent conflicts in Nepal, the West Bank/Gaza, Sudan, Kenya, and Uganda.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Strategic Interventions

USAID and other donors have successfully addressed LTPR challenges in post-conflict and unstable countries in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Europe. Programming options for LTPR assistance to the Government of Pakistan should include:

- Encourage and support the Pakistan government to redesign and implement the tenure reform and land redistribution programs previously attempted in the 1970s and 1980s.
- Support the establishment and reform of customary and civil land adjudication and conflict mediation institutions and procedures.
- Support nationwide efforts designed specifically to strengthen access to land for the landless, and women headed households in particular. Allocation and provision of access to government-held lands might be an option in the near term.
- Strengthen urban land access and tenure security of poor households by recognizing and documenting claims of poor households, and funding local
dispute mediation and legal aid

Further Reading

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