
Questions After Lahore

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WITHIN 48 hours of the signing of the Murree Declaration between Pakistan's two leading political parties, we were again hit by the magnitude of the internal security challenge we collectively face.

The fifth round of post-election suicide bombing attack hit Lahore. Over 25 more of our precious Pakistanis people died and many more precious ones from the badly injured too will also go. Beginning with endless spate of 2007 suicide attacks, Pakistan is now regularly bathed in blood. There is no red-line left for those who master-mind and execute these attacks, to now cross. Killing knows no limit and death-planners have completely drained themselves of all sensitivity. They target the innocents at a funeral procession, at hospitals, at shopping areas, in shops, in political processions, in mosques, in imambarghas, in churches, etc. Those who symbolise the state are often the prime targets. They comprise the army, the police, the navy, the air force, the rangers, and the frontier constabulary. Men in high places ranging from the army chief, the prime minister, corps commanders, ministers and the president. Leaders of great stature like Benazir Bhutto, too, have failed in escaping terrorist attacks.

In 2007, almost 1,000 Pakistani lives were lost, and in the first three months of 2008, already 350 plus have died. What can we then state without doubt about the unquestionably fast growing curse of terrorism? One, that it hits all alike, the entire nation in many geographical zones, those of the VIP ilk as well the average citizens. Two, the targets of the bombers not form a particular organisation, faith, ideology or gender. Three, over the last five years, when the Pakistan army began its operation in the tribal areas the incidence of terrorist violence has considerably gone up. Four, there is no evidence that President Parvez Musharraf's policy of tackling terrorism has produced positive results in the last five years. Despite President Musharraf's claim that the government was able to get the master minds behind these bombings, it seems that the problem has far from abated.

Pakistanis are today a nation exhausted by one, the Musharraf's regime's mantra that it is winning the war on terrorism; two, by the government's and analysts' dubious assertion that we are the front-line state in the war on terrorism; three, by the president's assertion that Pakistan's extremists have to be defeated and that the moderates have to be supported (in fact, recently, the president again claimed that in these elections the extremists had been defeated); four, by Washington's insistence that Pakistan needs to 'do more'; five, by the international community's concern that the Pakistani politicians may undermine the West's war on terrorism. Of course, beyond these words is the utter pain, horror and terror that the continued bombings inflict on the people of Pakistan. Often it is the fear of terrorism that the Western world experiences and not the Pakistani blood that is spilt that dominates the global discourse on terrorism and violence. Pakistanis, the victims of terrorism, become secondary to the Westerners who feel more threatened and less attacked by terrorism is of primary focus. Pakistanis now critique this lack of sensitivity towards their pain and suffering.

With the unending suicide bombings the inevitable lingering question is who does this? Are these sheer criminals, or war-hardened men, maybe pain-steeped reactionaries, maybe brain-washed men, maybe external detractors, maybe men within the state with their own agendas? We do not know for sure who these men are. Are these politically, ideologically, psychologically driven men? Are these men taking revenge? Are they sending us some message? Do they just want to terrorise Pakistani state and society? Do they want to send signals to Pakistani politicians?

In recent weeks security agencies have been warning repeatedly of impending suicidal bombings. They warn but they cannot always prevent these attacks. Also, in a society until recently so divided many ways – the presidency versus opposition politicians, the presidency versus the lawyers, the security agencies versus the militant groups in the tribal areas and beyond, the army versus the Baluch national groups, the armed Taleban versus security agencies -- the range of possible suspects is wide and nebulous. To add to this has been the interior minister's recent statement regarding possible involvement of the US, India and Afghanistan in these attacks.

There are no clear cut answers to the question of which groups are behind all this havoc wreaked on the Pakistanis. Only increasingly people from all political and ideological divides are grappling with the elements of our political-security context in which terrorism within Pakistan has been on the rise.

The elements are clear. One, we took a U-turn on the Afghanistan policy. It was one that was taken without taking the people along. Two, the US went in and created havoc next door, killing innocent Afghans along with suspected terrorists. Three, we joined the US war on terror without a strategy of where we will set the limits, how we would protect Pakistani lives, dignity and rights. Four, instead of getting out of the 'firing line' of the US, we actually brought fire into our own home by allowing US access to bases and to our airspace. Five, the increasing perception in Pakistan that this is not our war. Six, the killing of innocent Pakistani in the tribal areas as 'collateral' during the army's operations. Seven, the growing alienation between the army and the Pakistani people.

Pakistan's greatest challenge now is a politician led national consensus on how to battle this endless bloodletting. It requires going back to the drawing board -- asking the 'what and why' of the causes of this growing nightmare. The right answer to the 'how' of responding to the challenge will come only we get the why right and have a national consensus on

the why.

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