
Pakistan Rethinks US Policy On Militants

Posted by Zia - 2008/04/02 15:36

There is a buzz of excitement in the wood-panelled assembly hall of Pakistan's parliament.

After eight years of military rule, the new legislators feel empowered by an enormous popular mandate.

And they are ready to tackle unpopular policies, especially Pakistan's participation in what is called the War on Terror.

"We've gone through enough problems because of following different agendas of different countries - we need to follow our own agenda," said one parliamentarian from the governing coalition, speaking to a crush of reporters outside.

"Pakistan must get out of America's fatal embrace," said another.

Out of the loop

Comments like these alarm the Americans, because Pakistan is crucial to their Afghan policy.

Since 9/11 they have relied on President Pervez Musharraf and the army for cooperation against al-Qaeda and the Taliban, in exchange for billions of dollars.

Until now parliament was out of the loop.

"No one in this country knows what General Musharraf has agreed with the Americans or anyone else!" says Ahsan Iqbal, a minister in the new cabinet.

The president apparently agreed to an increase in US air strikes in the Taliban strongholds near the Afghan border.

These have killed around 50 people this year, including militants.

Like everyone else, Mr Iqbal read about the tacit understanding in the newspaper.

Such heavy handed tactics "give a cause for these militants to fight for", he says, "so therefore I think whatever strategy we work out, the sovereignty of Pakistan must be respected and we should not give more fuel to these militants".

Security

Pakistanis believe a deadly bombing campaign in the country is the price they are paying for missile strikes and large scale army operations against the militants.

Nearly a thousand people were killed in suicide attacks last year.

And massive injections of American aid have made little difference to their security.

"The general perception in Pakistan is that the deal over the War on Terror was favourable only to one party and unfavourable to Pakistan," says Aseff Ahmad Ali, a member of the governing Pakistan Peoples' Party and a former foreign minister.

"The Americans give us a billion dollars a year for the War on Terror. But where has the money gone? We don't know, maybe to the army.

"But we do know there's been no trickle-down effect - there is neither internal (security) nor food security nor development.

"To the common man the US-Pakistan deal looks absolutely awful. It has to be renegotiated."

Negotiation

In a speech outlining the government's policies, Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gillani emphasized social and political reforms to address the causes of militancy.

He also said the government would negotiate with those who laid down their arms.

Some of his coalition partners go further, like the Pashtun Awami National Party (ANP), which has gained power in the

North West Frontier Province near the Afghan border.

"This problem is not going to be solved by my going to talk to the tribal elders only," the provincial chief minister, Amir Haider Khan Hoti, told the Dawn newspaper.

"Unless we somehow approach the one who has taken up arms, or is involved in suicide bombing or has gone to the other extreme, and reach an understanding with him, the problem would not be solved."

'Clear and present danger'

This is a long term solution, but does America have the patience to wait? The head of its Central Intelligence Agency is sounding very impatient.

"The situation on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border presents a clear and present danger to... the West in general and the United States in particular," Michael Hayden said during a recent interview on NBC television.

"It's very clear to us that al-Qaeda has been able for the past 18 months or so to establish a safe haven along the border area that they have not enjoyed before.

"Operationally, we are turning every effort to capture or kill that leadership from the top to the bottom."

Tanvir Ahmed Khan, a former Pakistani ambassador to Afghanistan argues that "the Americans have leverage (in Pakistan), but not the same degree as before".

"There would be a restive parliament. There is no strong opinion in parliament for reversing the policy, but there is a strong opinion for moderating it, for a better mix between military and diplomatic measures."

Military wary

But will Pakistan's powerful army agree?

President Musharraf's attempts at peace deals only strengthened the militants and put the military on the back-foot, says retired General Shujaat Ali Khan. The military would be wary of going down the same path again.

"There may be an (initial) agreement on the part of the militants, to sort of pull back their punches", he says, "but during this two or three month period there is a danger that they may regroup.

"And if the armed force is withdrawn, there may be a resurgence, and they'll strike again."

Many here also believe that peace inside Pakistan will be difficult, as long as American and Nato troops remain in Afghanistan.

On Sunday the Pakistan Taleban Movement (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan) responded to the government's overtures.

It said it was ready to end attacks inside Pakistan if the authorities showed flexibility, but the 'jihad' against America would continue in Afghanistan.

"Our war is with America", local Taleban leader Maulvi Faqir Muhammed told a rally. "Whenever Pakistan will work for American interests as its ally, we will oppose it."

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