

Opinion

Talibanisation of Pakistan: A Bonfire of Pakistani youth

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In this cracked mirror of the civil war in Afghanistan, we do find glowing reflections of the life-and-death struggle of our own destiny as a free and civilized country. This linkage was, of course, planted in those heady days of the war of 'liberation' in the eighties. The social cost of our involvement in this initially cold war deception was present to all careful and objective observers. But the history of Pakistan, alas, has largely been shaped by the establishment's defiance of rationality. Consequently, we are now threatened with the Talibanisation of our polity. And this insidious backlash is not restricted to the growth of 'jehadi' passions. The entire landscape of the mind of our youth is laid waste for want of learning, enlightenment and tolerance.

Unfortunately, this aspect of the depredation of our youth has not attracted much attention. This dereliction, a kind of delinquency on the part of our rulers, is suicidal in nature, considering our demographic features. The thought of how we are increasingly being overwhelmed by people in the lower age brackets is fearful, indeed. What this means in the context of the existing state of education, culture and politics in our country is already very evident. There is the reality of the madaris, the seminaries which have produced the Taliban.

At the other end of the spectrum, we have the example of how the youth in some of Karachi's congested localities has been inducted into militant and criminal activities because he has almost nowhere to go. But so much of all this has flourished under the shadow of Afghanistan, if you look at the so-called Kalashnikov culture and the spread of hard drugs.

There have been allegations that many students of the madaris situated in Pakistan have joined the Taliban in Afghanistan. A number of these students may be Afghan nationals. In any case, the UNICEF representative for Afghanistan in Islamabad has expressed concern over the growing recruitment of students from seminaries for the war in Afghanistan. Talking to a German news agency, he could not give an exact figure as to how many students had joined the Afghan civil war on the side of the Taliban, but said that the "number is in thousands and a big number of the fresh draftees is under the age of 18". He said the trend was of great concern to the United Nations and that was why the world body was appealing to all the Afghan factions to refrain from recruiting young fighters for any of the fronts.

According to the German news agency, a Taliban delegation recently visited northwestern Pakistan to persuade the students to take part in the 'jihad' in Afghanistan. It also referred to press reports, which suggest that most of the madaris in the northwestern frontier area had been closed to allow the young students, mostly Afghans, to join the fighting in the war-ravaged country. There was a mention of one pro-Taliban seminary in Akora Khattak, some 120 kilometers northwest of Islamabad. Naturally, the authorities in Islamabad have rejected the charges that Pakistan has been

supporting the Taliban and that recruits from its madaris are fighting in Afghanistan. Their stance has been that the government could not be responsible for any individuals who may have managed to cross the border and joined the ranks of the combatants. Meanwhile, the Taliban authorities in Kabul have rejected the UN allegation that they were inducting children in the civil war.

Be that as it may, we should be more concerned about the impact of the war in Afghanistan on our own society. Maulana Fazlur Rahman, for instance, is not a combatant in Afghanistan. He is the leader of a Pakistani religious party, which openly vindicates the cause of the Taliban and, in this process, exposes the ambivalence of our official policy. However, the manner in which he has been attacking the United States would obviously not please the Pakistan government. The federal cabinet is reported to have discussed the anti-US statements of Maulana Fazlur Rahman on three consecutive occasions and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is said to have asked the Law Ministry to propose a law to effectively deal with such threats.

This resolve was apparently prompted by a discussion on Pakistan's image in the West with reference to a report prepared by the Foreign Ministry on human rights issues. In its summary to the cabinet, the ministry has proposed the establishment of a national coordination committee to monitor violations of human rights and suggest corrective measures.

But the cabinet is unlikely to have understood the basic reasons for Pakistan's poor image in the international media because they are located in the very performance of the government. After all, the image is not different from the reality. The ruling ideas in Pakistan are potentially averse to the promotion of human rights and the establishment of an open, democratic society.

By the way, the present government has completed half of its prescribed term and Information Minister, Mushahid Hussain's 'fact-sheet' on this occasion was a brave attempt to look at everything through a Khabarnama-coloured glass. Yes, survival itself could be the present government's greatest achievement, in spite of the fact that the weapon with which the previous post-Zia regimes were demolished no longer exists. Growing popular indignation over the state of affairs is also an extension of uncertainty about the future. Almost everybody seems convinced of the need for a drastic change in the conduct of national affairs but nobody knows how this can happen.

But can the present government make a shift on its own? This question can only be answered in a positive manner if Nawaz Sharif is able, for instance, to launch a campaign against the Talibanisation of our society. Among other things, this would also restore Pakistan's image in the world and generate conditions for social and economic growth.

In some ways, the logic for a change of this magnitude is becoming more and more evident. It would not have been without some reason that the cabinet was compelled to review the human rights situation in Pakistan in the wake of critical reports on press freedom, 'honour' killings, and the rise of religious extremism. The developing situation in Afghanistan also demands serious contemplation. Here is an opportunity to show to the world that Pakistan is not involved in Afghanistan's civil war by not getting too close to the Taliban and by blocking the links that some elements have established with the Afghan war.

Ultimately, a new effort is to be made to liberate the youth from the bondage of ignorance, intolerance and extremism. This would call for a liberal, democratic dispensation and a massive campaign to move forward in the areas of education and social development. All our present afflictions confirm the imperative for the creation of an open society in which the young have an opportunity to operate with a sense of responsibility and freedom.

Also relevant in terms of what the Taliban represent is the issue of the status of women. We have, in our educational institutions, some evidence of the intellectual capabilities of our young women. The time has come to build a formidable barrier against the gradual brutalisation of our society, which in the real sense, is the brutalisation of the minds of our young people.

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