

OPINION

Challenge of Resurgent Radicalism: Ignore at your Peril

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Pakistan is passing through an interesting phase of transition since the last elections. There have been alternate waves of euphoria and dismay ever since the new coalition assumed power in Islamabad. The constitution is largely in a state of abeyance. The three institutions competing for power are leveraging their positions vis-à-vis one another. The power equations among them are still unclear.

The political forces are trying hard to stay together with their differing world-views. The 'judges' issue is far from settled. The dialogue with militants is appearing more like a tame surrender than a well-thought-out strategy to bring peace to the turbulent tribal terrain. The external actors having influence on the

politics of Pakistan are busy fathoming the political dynamics that is slowly emerging on the horizon. The power of the people that made this transition possible is all but forgotten.

The impending economic crisis, largely the consequence of external conditions rather than statistical fudging by previous government, has added an interesting dimension to the prevailing uncertainty. It has made the government more circumspect and moderate than expected. This is the only silver lining in an otherwise dark cloud.

It is still difficult to predict how long this spirit of moderation and reconciliation will last. The eight long years of military rule had brought in a dynamic a coercive politics, which demanded that you could only

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matter if you had a gun in your hand. In the changed circumstances, it is difficult to imagine that the non-state actors would be willing to shun violence as a strategy especially when they have brought the state to its knees.

These forces have got used to gun-running, establishing virtual control over ungoverned stretches of Pakistani territory and have gone to the extent of committing suicides for the sake of bringing back the rule of Islam to this world. It is unlikely that they would heed the advice of the democratic government unless it makes it amply clear that invitation for dialogue should not be mistaken for weakness of the government. It must demonstrate its resolve to wield force if dialogues fail.

There is a misperception in Pakistan today that the army and the new government have differing perspectives on how to deal with the radical elements in the tribal belt. In fact, in spite of the pressures from the US on both, they have scaled down army action in the tribal areas.

The provincial government is engaged in a dialogue with the militants. Maulana Sufi Muhammad, a great patron of Taliban, has been released. His son-in-law Maulana

Fazlullah has reappeared in Swat and is running his Qazi courts there. Baitullah Mehsud has also been engaged in a dialogue. Mangal Bagh, chief of Lashkar-i-Islami is being allowed to flourish in Khyber. Tehrik-e-Taliban, the amorphous combine of Pakistani Taliban groups, is being invited to shun violence and talk to the government.

Some sources reveal that these groups are being told that the state will allow them relative autonomy in their respective areas if they de-link themselves from Al Qaeda network and maintain relative distance from Afghan Taliban. The government now considers their links with Afghan Taliban natural and sufferable. At a moment when dialogue with Taliban is going on across Durand line, the government is rather trying to use these forces to reach out to the Afghan Taliban.

This is not to deny that Pakistani intelligence had maintained their links with some sections of the Taliban. But in recent years, many new pro-Taliban groups have emerged in both southern Afghanistan and north-western Pakistan. During Musharraf's rule, these forces considered Pakistani forces as stooges of the US and adopted new strategies to deal with

them. There was a surge in suicide attacks in 2006-2007, which managed to have its impact on the Pakistani forces fighting the war on terror under US pressures without much conviction.

The army is therefore taking this as an opportunity to restore its image of not being a stooge of the US and it has the additional advantage of hiding under the cloak of the civilian government. The army and the government are hopeful nonetheless that the new approach will succeed at least in stopping the spread of Taliban extremism beyond the tribal areas.

The army is quite hopeful that it can quarantine the influence of Talibanism in the FATA region. The government is hopeful that it can make good use of the fig leaf it has extended to the local Taliban and reach out to the Taliban across the border and make a workable deal possible in Kabul. Their optimism does not possibly factor in the growing confidence of the Taliban in the entire Pashtun belt straddling the Durand line. The Taliban are not known for their reconciliatory approach when they perceive their fortunes are on the rise. Moreover, there is no centralised leadership with which the government can talk.

Another critical challenge emerging on the horizon is the slow but sure reappearance of sectarian and jihadi elements in Pakistan. Musharraf had tried to rein in these forces only after he came to know of the hands of these elements in the two assassination attempts in 2003. His policy towards them had a personal bias which was not shared across the rank and file of the army. The intelligence agencies maintained their links with many of these groups, and are now seeking to restore them in their nefarious games both at the internal and external levels.

Right on the day the media in Pakistan reported that India had advanced a set of CBMs in Kashmir to sustain the path of peace, there were reports that Kashmir militant groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Muhammad, Hizb-ul-Mujahideen and Al Badar had started regrouping again right under the nose of the security agencies in Punjab and Sind.

These forces are, in fact, on the rise. More than their Kashmir-centricity, they are likely to bring back sectarian animus in to the body politic in Pakistan. They have started preaching their version in different mosques and teaching such a spurious and militant ideology in the madrassas under their control. They

consider all other groups heretical and deem it a divine duty to force others to adopt their belief.

These forces still have precipitate links with Al Qaeda remnants. They are and are immensely influenced by the Wahabi worldview. Some of them are funded by charitable organisations from the gulf and are obliged to pursue an intensely sectarian and intolerant version of Islam in Pakistan.

It will be improper to acknowledge the contribution of the US in raising the mass appeal of these groups. Every time there is an indiscriminate aerial attack in the tribal belt, the image of Osama Bin Laden as a lovable recluse who has the guts to take on the mightiest power in the world gets further consolidated.

If one looks at the popular verdict in the elections this time, there is a pervasive anti-Americanism among the populace not because US has supported a military ruler like Musharraf in Pakistan. Majority of them had loved Musharraf till he deposed the Chief Justice. They are

against the US because of its policies towards Iraq and Palestine. If one takes a survey today in Pakistan, most of them understand and approve of the US action against Afghanistan.

But after the Iraq war, most of them believed that the US had taken the people of the region for granted and was blinded by its success in Afghanistan. As long as Iraq continues to burn and Palestinians are denied their right to have a homeland of their own, the anti-Americanism will prosper in the entire Muslim world. Pakistan will be no exception. Such anti-US feelings will inevitably turn into sympathy for regressive forces like Osamas and Mullah Omars.

The present government labouring under an economic crisis would like to retain its links with the US and try not to displease the big brother. The US is also not expected to adopt any moderation in its policies towards Taliban. In that case, it is more likely that Pakistan will soon return to greater turbulence and uncertainty in the coming days. ■