

OPINION

Let Good Sense Prevail

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Mariott hotel bombing in Islamabad and Mumbai attacks are important indicators of Pakistan's failure to come to terms with itself. It signals the arrival of high-value targeting by terrorists and marks the failure of the state machinery. Is Pakistan in for an inconclusive battle for control between the Islamist radicals of all hue and the state forces? Will it mean descent into chaos and anarchy, as some analyst has hinted at?

Many analysts within and outside Pakistan had expected the level of violence within Pakistan to go down after the elections in March 2008. Between February and June 2008, there was a marked decline; but it picked up since July. If human casualty is taken as an indicator, there were 671 casualties between March

and June, while the casualty between June and September stands at 2571. This spike in violence could also be due to the spurt in army action against the terrorists in the whole country in general and tribal areas in particular during last four months.

Following the elections, Pakistan has had to weather multiple challenges. The new government is facing multiple problems. It has to clear up the mess in Pakistani economy left by Musharraf administration. It has to hold the coalition together and secure popular approval for its actions. As if this was not enough, now, it has to fend off an assertive US, which seeks to cross the Durand line and chase the pro-Taliban militants in the tribal areas of Pakistan and also an aggressive India which is threatening to cross the border and take on the Jihadi forces, if Pakistan fails to control them.

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All this does not augur well for the democratic forces. The rise of Islamists radicals in Pakistan and their determination to spread it to other countries in the region threatens to create a situation where army's return to power will be inevitable. The toothless civilian government appears too submissive and pliant and unable to go beyond rhetorical statements. The economic crisis looming large on the horizon necessitates cooperation with the US and the West, which means Pakistan has to find some way of obliging them with proactive army action in the tribal areas. It has to come out with visible results.

However, it can hardly do that without stirring the hornet's nest, i.e., without provoking the militants. The civilian government in Pakistan is, therefore, in an unenviable position, between the rock and a hard place.

The army action in the tribal areas especially in Bajaur, Swat and Waziristan has brought several alarming facts to limelight. It has exposed a well-kept secret by the previous Musharraf government— the deep nexus between Al Qaeda and Taliban. What is worse, this alliance has sucked into its orbit most of the rabid Islamist militant groups in

Pakistan today.

Writing editorially from Peshawar, Frontier Post, captures the problems facing Pakistan most eloquently: "At peril is not just preservation of our territorial sanctity and national sovereignty. We are in the clutches of a terrorism rooted in rabid religiosity, strident fanaticism and bloody faith-based irredentism. ... And we are in deep economic straits from where to come out we need dollops of foreign aid, which could potentially be employed by vested interests as brutal leverage to squeeze out compliance from us to perpetuate their ends." It is really an unfortunate situation.

Is there any way out this crisis for Zardari and his PPP government? Can it avert its downfall and possibly another military takeover? In fact, if we look around, we may find there may be sound alternatives available.

Pakistan has for long appended itself to the apron strings of the US and earned for itself the reputation of a rentier economy. Neither the US nor the ruling elite in Pakistan realises that this is not going to work on a long term basis. Economy being as delicate a subject, the moment the doles are withdrawn, Pakistan will be back in crisis. Going back in history one finds several instances when US relaxed its economic

engagement with Pakistan, i.e., in the early 1970s, in the early 1990s and also between 1998 and September 2001. These were the years of doldrums, of turbulence and of rise of the army in Pakistan.

Somehow, there is a strong link between civilian consolidation of power in Pakistan and the smooth functioning of economy. Pakistan has not made any substantial attempt to regenerate its economy and turn it into a self-sustaining one. This has affected its political environment and contributed to the strength of the army.

Let us then ask: how Pakistan can overcome this situation and why it cannot? Pakistan has shunned regional economic cooperation, primarily because of its sense of insecurity vis-a-vis India. It is also due to this that it has sought to ally itself with US and China and built up its military machinery in such a way that the military has become the 'state' itself.

Any attempt to unwind this self-created sense of insecurity is thoroughly discouraged by the elite in Pakistan. For the politicians, India-bashing is a favourite exercise and an unresolved Kashmir is an emotional rallying point. For the military, it is

the very *raison de'tre* for its predominance in Pakistani society. Remove India as Pakistan's enemy, the army would be groping in the dark for any other legitimate basis for self-aggrandisement.

Pakistan's enmity with India has stood in its way of participating in an otherwise flourishing regional economy. It buys Indian products through indirect trade through Dubai, much of it through black trade, and also through Singapore. It buys tea and coffee from Africa and Latin America which is much costlier, but not from India, which could be much cheaper. It can earn lot of revenue from offering its territory as a transit route to Afghanistan and Iran. But it will never grant India access to Afghanistan. Afghan trucks are allowed to bring Afghan products till Indian border, but they are not permitted to carry back any product from India.

Similarly, gas pipe line from Iran can be a real economic bonanza for Pakistan and help it earn millions of dollars every year from transit cost, but it goes on offending India on the basic issue of trade and commerce by attaching the issue of Kashmir to it. Indian snub on Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline is thus very much natural.

If Pakistan says no to normal trade and commerce, why should India oblige it with so much transit revenue? India can afford not to have a pipeline. Pakistan cannot.

Pakistan's effort to rope in Chinese investment into the pipeline project will never bear fruit. It will be awfully expensive for Chinese to transport it through the Karakoram Highway. Moreover, investment from international financial organisation will be difficult, given American allergy to both Iran and China.

At another level, Pakistan's romance with Kashmir has been detrimental to its own interests. It has fought two and half wars with India over Kashmir without success. It has sponsored militancy which has come home to roost.

Most of the Pakistani militant groups raised by Pakistani intelligence to fight Indian forces in Kashmir, have preferred to adopt an intensely intolerant Sunni sectarian agenda at home and disturbed internal peace and harmony. They have developed links with Islamist outfits like Al Qaeda and Taliban and would like to bring Islamic rule in Pakistan. Pakistan's fight against these forces has just begun. It will take years of determined and concerted action to root out these

elements. And as long as Pakistan uses them as an instrument of its policy towards India and Afghanistan, these forces will continue to bleed Pakistan from within and disturb the prospects of Indo-Pak peace.

We in Pakistan should make no mistake about it. The world will deal firmly with a Pakistan seething with Islamic radicalism. Even our closest ally China, with whom we have a relationship, which is being touted as "taller than the Himalayas and deeper than the Indian Ocean", is now suspicious of our intentions. We saw the Chinese desperately seeking out their own contact to rescue their engineers kidnapped by the Islamists, rather than approaching our security agencies for help.

The Chinese know very well that the militants operating in Xinjiang are also being trained in the tribal belt of Pakistan and the state of Pakistan cannot be of much help in spite of its best intentions. They would rather quietly invite precipitate armed action by the Americans.

Pakistan is in difficult times. Only timely decision can save Pakistan from the impending danger. It has to bury its past with India, reinvent

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itself at the regional level, and recast itself as a peaceful nation and not a sponsor of militancy. Militancy in Kashmir may have been our greatest achievement but we must know it cannot go on for ever. We cannot

afford to fight the Indian forces to the last Pakistani. And Kashmiris are shunning militancy as a method of protest. Bad means may get you to your end, but they won't let you stay there for long. Let good sense prevail.

