

Pakistan: Anti-Americanism & Taliban

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THE recent killing of eleven Pakistani soldiers at Gora Prai by American and Nato forces across the border in Afghanistan unleashed an amazing storm.

Prime Minister Gilani declared, "We will take a stand for sovereignty, integrity and self-respect." The military announced defiantly, "We reserve the right to protect our citizens and soldiers against aggression," while Army chief, Gen Pervez Ashfaq Kayani, called the attack 'cowardly'. The dead became 'shaheeds' and large numbers of people turned up to pray at their funerals.

But had the killers been the Taliban, this would have been a non-event. The storm we saw was more about cause than consequence. Protecting the sovereignty of the state, self-respect, citizens and soldiers against aggression, and the lives of Pakistani soldiers, suddenly all acquired value because the killers were American and Nato troops.

Compare the response to Gora Prai with the near silence about the recent kidnapping and slaughter by Baitullah Mehsud's fighters of 28 men near Tank, some of whom were shot and others had their throats cut. Even this pales before the hundred or more attacks by suicide bombers over the last year that made bloody carnage of soldiers and officers, devastated peace jirgas and public rallies, and killed hundreds praying in mosques and at funerals.

These murders were largely ignored or, when noted, simply shrugged off. The very different reactions to the casualties of American and Nato violence, compared to those inflicted by the Taliban, reflect a desperate confusion about what is happening in Pakistan and how to respond.

Some newspaper and television commentators want Pakistan to withdraw from the American-led war on Al Qaeda and the Taliban, to stop US fuel and ammunition supplies into Afghanistan, and hit hard against Afghan troops when provoked. One far-right commentator even urges turning our guns against the Americans and Nato, darkly hinting that Pakistan is a nuclear power.

There is, of course, reason for people in Pakistan and across the world to feel negatively about America. In pursuit of its self-interest, wealth and security, the United States has for decades waged illegal wars, bribed, bullied and overthrown governments, supported tyrants, undermined movements for progressive change, and now feels free to kidnap, torture, imprison, and kill anywhere in the world with impunity. All this, while talking about supporting democracy and human rights.

Even Americans — or at least the fair-minded ones among them — admit that there is a genuine problem. A June 2008 report of the US House Committee on Foreign Affairs entitled *The Decline in America's Reputation: Why?* concluded that contemporary anti-Americanism stemmed from "the perception that the proclaimed American values of democracy, human rights, tolerance, and the rule of law have been selectively ignored by successive administrations when American security or economic considerations are in play".

American hypocrisy has played into the hands of Islamic militants. They have been vigorously promoting the notion that this is a bipolar conflict of Islam, which they claim to represent, versus

imperialism. Many Pakistanis, who desperately want someone to stand up to the Americans, buy into this.

This is a fatal mistake. The militants are using America as a smokescreen for their real agenda. Created by poverty, a war-culture, and the macabre manipulations of Pakistan's intelligence services, the militants want more than just to fight an aggressor from across the oceans. Their goal is to establish their writ over that of the Pakistani state. For this, they have been attacking and killing people in Pakistan through the 1990s, well before 9/11. Remember also that the 4,000-plus victims of jihad in Pakistan over the last year have been Muslims with no connection at all to America. In fact, the Taliban are waging an armed struggle to remake society. They will keep fighting this war even if America were to miraculously evaporate into space.

A Taliban victory would transport us into the darkest of dark ages. These fanatics dream of transforming the country into a religious state where they will be the law. They stone women to death, cut off limbs, kill doctors for administering polio shots, force girl-children into burqa, threaten beard-shaving barbers with death, blow up girls schools at a current average of two per week, forbid music, punish musicians, destroy 2000-year statues. Even flying kites is a life-threatening sin.

The Taliban agenda has no place for social justice and economic development. There is silence from Taliban leaders about poverty, and the need to create jobs for the unemployed, building homes, providing education, land reform, or doing away with feudalism and tribalism. They see no need for worldly things like roads, hospitals and infrastructure.

If the militants of Pakistan ever win it is clear what our future will be like. Education, bad as it is today, would at best be replaced by the mind-numbing indoctrination of the madressahs whose gift to society would be an army of suicide bombers. In a society policed by vice-and-virtue squads, music, art, drama, and cultural expressions would disappear. Pakistan would re-tribalise and resemble a cross between Fata and Saudi Arabia (minus the oil).

Pakistanis tolerate these narrow-minded, unforgiving men because they claim to fight for Islam. But the Baitullahs and Fazlullahs know nothing of the diversity, and creative richness of Muslims, whether today or in the past. Intellectual freedom led to science, architecture, medicine, arts and crafts, and literature that were the hallmark of Islamic civilisation in its golden age. They grew because of an open-minded, tolerant, cosmopolitan, and multi-cultural character. Caliphs, such as Haroon-al-Rashid and Al-Mamoun, brought together scholars of diverse faiths and helped establish a flourishing culture. Today's self-declared amir-ul-momineen, like Mullah Omar, would gladly behead great Islamic scholars like Ibn Sina and Al-Razi for heresy and burn their books.

Pakistan must find the will to fight the Taliban. The state, at both the national and provincial level, must assert its responsibility to protect life and law rather than simply make deals. State functionaries, and even the khasadars, have disappeared from much of the tribal areas. Pakistan is an Islamic state falling into anarchy and chaos, being rapidly destroyed from within by those who claim to fight for Islam.

Pakistanis must not be deceived. This is no clash of civilisations. To the Americans, Pakistan is an instrument to be used for their strategic ends. It is necessary and possible to say no. But the Taliban seek to capture and bind the soul and future of Pakistan in the dark prison fashioned by their ignorance. As they now set their sights on Peshawar and beyond, they must be resisted by all possible means, including adequate military force.

P.S.

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