

Whither Pakistan!

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'Whither Pakistan?'. This is a question now a days repeatedly raised in media globally in the wake of high-profile suicidal attacks in last two weeks. It was not the deadly suicidal attacks in Frontier province that triggered a global panic. Such attacks have become a business-as-usual headline. According to Pakistan's leading daily *Dawn*, 280 Taliban attacks in last two years have claimed 2200 lives. It was rather less bloody but highly symbolic *fidayee* assault on jealously guarded army headquarters, GHQ, on October 10 that has traumatised all and sundry.

A coordinated attack on October 15 in Lahore, country's second largest town, on three police facilities only reinforced the sense of insecurity. The government decision on October 20, following a suicidal attack on International Islamic University in capital Islamabad, to close down schools and colleges across Pakistan have served to spread further panic. Scared citizens, particularly in big town, are not daring step out of their homes unless necessary. Traders are complaining a sharp decline in the number of customers.

Commentators in Pakistan media have interpreted recent spate of attacks as last-ditch, desperate attempt by Taliban to forestall a military operation in South Waziristan, Taliban's last fortification. If that indeed was the Taliban's intention, these attacks have proved counter-productive. On 17 October, long-awaited military offensive in South Waziristan was launched. Aided by fighter jets and gunship helicopters, 30,000 Pakistani troops have been pitched against 10,000 Taliban. Military spokesperson, Major General Atthar Abbas says army would flush Taliban out of South Waziristan in six to eight weeks.

Will military succeed? Before answering this question, we first need to define success. If the aim is to secure South Waziristan, army will succeed. If the purpose is to eliminate Taliban, the answer is NO. Army busy bombing militants in South Waziristan, earlier in Swat, patronises them in Punjab and other parts of the country. The Waziristan offensive is a selective operation against Taliban gone out of army's control. They are in army's view: "Bad Taliban". Those fighting US-forces in Afghanistan need not worry. They are "Good Taliban". Similarly, outfits like Jaish-e-Muhammad and Laskar-e-Tayyaba, built by Pakistan army to bleed India in Kashmir, keep enjoying impunity. Jihadi infrastructure, comprising of Maskars (militants' training camps) and Madrassas (Quran schools), is not being dismantled. A section of Pakistani press has repeatedly exposed military-Taliban nexus.

The Pakistani media dominated by religious right, however, have in general been sympathetic to Taliban and until recently would glorify Taliban as Pashtoon resistance force fighting back US imperialism. Taliban are, on the contrary, seen by most of Pashtoons in Pakistan as a threat to Pashtoon culture, economy, progress and peace. Unlike some leftists and Islamists portraying Taliban as resistance force, Pashtoons in Pakistan ask why Taliban are slaughtering locals or bombing their schools if they want to liberate Afghanistan? The Pashtoons don't want to grow beards, give up dance or music and stop sending their girls to schools for the "liberation of Afghanistan" Taliban want to bring. As a matter of fact, the destruction of economy, bombing of schools depriving 100000 girls of education or other absurd actions in the name of Sharia have rendered Taliban extremely unpopular.

That Taliban have lost sympathy is evident from the fact that country's Islamist or right-wing parties as well as columnists or popular talk-show hosts, once used to extol Taliban, now find it impossible

to defend Taliban's mindless violence. Few even have turned against Taliban. Others hide behind conspiracy theories (blaming India and the USA, even Israel).

But mass support or public image is not Taliban's vexation. They are not doing an election campaign. They are a band of charged up zealots engaged in what they believe is Jihad. Thus, rising or sinking Taliban popularity does not explain the strength of Taliban phenomenon. It is poverty, state patronage, aggressive US intervention in the region and petro-dollars that stoke Taliban militancy. Every year tens of thousands graduate from Quran schools. A sizeable number of these graduates-in-fanaticism are ready to blow themselves up for the cause. The Quran schools keep breeding Taliban (that literally means students of Quran schools). These schools constitute the real threat.

Are they a threat to Pakistan's nuclear plants too? In the presence of half-million-strong standing army, it seems highly unlikely. The only, least likely, possibility is that General Kayani (military chief) is overthrown in a coup by radical Islamist officers who seize control of the country's nuclear weapons. These Islamists within military, however, stand hardly any chance owing to their growing isolation inside junior ranks. Also, the military leadership, busy mending its image badly tarnished under Musharraf dictatorship, will not go for a coup any time soon. The state will manage to stem present tide of suicidal attacks. The ruling class won't hand the state over to a band of fanatics on a plate. But Pakistan will remain in a civil war-like situation.