

# **Facing tragedy with courage in Pakistan's "war on terror"**

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**It is a rare event in modern history that a country has been at war for over a decade without being able to identify who the enemy is. Pakistan's 15-year involvement in the global 'war on terror' has turned the country into a primary theatre of this conflict, with immense costs in terms of loss of lives and adverse impact on the economy. Yet, it still remains a daunting task for us, both as a society and a state, to clearly articulate who is responsible for this carnage, let alone propose solutions to this perpetual nightmare.**

The recent tragic-comedy of the blasts in Lahore, where we remain unsure even on whether it was a terrorist attack or a work-safety incident (the latter itself an outrageously regular occurrence in the country) shows that we might just be regressing in terms of providing political and intellectual clarity.

What has infuriated many progressive commentators is how in the aftermath of deadly attacks that are ripping apart our social fabric, popular opinion tends to become entrenched in existing certainties and prejudices rather than demanding a break from the status quo. Popular explanations for the attacks have ranged from hinting at government collusion to distract the public from Panamagate, to the hysterical accusations against Afghan involvement, not to mention the widely-held belief that our eastern neighbour was involved due to petty jealousy over our ability to host as grand an event as the PSL final in Lahore! In these narratives, it is the world against Pakistan.

Yet, while much has been written on the obvious vacuity of such assertions, our task should be to interrogate the structural reasons that continuously reproduce such opinions at a mass level. Primarily, such a task requires us to break from a theological belief in the power of tragedy to make the situation more transparent, not to mention induce a desire for a rupture from the status quo. In fact, tragedies, including terrorism, natural disasters and economic-political turmoil, far from posing a threat to the powers that be, have become an essential tool in the armoury of modern states for further enhancing their grip over socio-economic life. This point was made a decade ago by Naomi Klein in her celebrated book, 'The Shock Doctrine'.

Klein argued that a docile citizenry, frightened and disoriented in the aftermath of tragic events, is deemed ideal by state authorities for carrying out far-reaching "reforms" that benefit ruling elites, without much popular opposition. Her examples included the devastating economic reforms in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union that allowed the formation of an economic oligarchy, and the hysterical response to the 9/11 attacks in the US that paved the way for public support for a more aggressive American intervention in the Middle East, much to the delight of the military-industrial complex.

We can clearly see how this method of control is currently being practised in Pakistan. The fear induced by terrorist attacks spontaneously leads to an outcry for revenge, without much discussion on who should be the subject of this revenge. It is precisely at this point that powerful apparatuses,

including the government and the media, enter the fray, to harness the feelings of fear and disorientation. It begins with the customary sensationalism in the live coverage of the event, where the pressure to drive up ratings means that the reporting is intended less at conveying information about the tragedy, and more at emphasising the magnitude of the tragedy, lest anyone consider changing the channel. Such manipulation of our sensory experience was on display after the latest Lahore blasts, when news channels were 'reporting' two or three terror attacks in Lahore, perpetuating panic across the city.

This panic is often followed by official and media analysis of the events, recycling the list of the usual suspects (India, the West, Afghanistan, etc), without any coherent narrative in which all of them can be placed together. The haphazardly cobbled together list of external enemies does little to inform the frightened multitude, and more to disorient their imaginary, instilling a feeling that the 'nation' is under siege, without fully elaborating by whom and - more importantly - for what reason.

The next stage is a desperate attempt to overcome the feeling of collective emasculation by a search for a protective patriarch. It is here that the coercive apparatus comes into force, dazzling the public with immediate action, followed by creatively chosen names for impending military operations. Statistics of 'terrorists' killed and arrested start making the rounds, with the anonymity of those purportedly targeted wilfully ignored by a public in search of some solace. Moreover, exceptional measures, such as the institution of military courts, are enthusiastically accepted by a population ready to cede its democratic rights for a vague feeling of retribution.

We must emphasise that a tragedy is never a neutral phenomenon, and all discourse of 'not politicising' a tragic event often permits only the state to extract political mileage out of it. This is the key to unlocking why traumatic events do not in themselves produce a progressive discourse. In moments of absolute fear and helplessness, people tend to gravitate towards recognisable ideological frameworks, as well as coercive apparatuses, in a frantic search for stability. The biggest casualty of this drama is public debate, with dissent immediately equated either with cowardice, or in a more sinister vein, with a foreign conspiracy.

It is for this reason that the recurrent tragedies we face must be openly debated in the public domain if we are to break the cycle of fear, anger and docility. For example, in order to win this war, it will be pertinent to interrogate the previous military offensives to see what parts of the strategy worked and where lie the persistent failures. Moreover, while hundreds of anonymous terrorists have presumably been killed, it is important to ask what is stopping us from extending this bravado to more clearly identifiable, and globally notorious, groups openly preaching hate throughout Punjab, not to mention inside the federal capital itself.

On the ideological terrain, the violence permeating our daily lives ought to be mobilised for another scandalous proposition - regional peace. With a number of officials admitting (including recently, General (r) Musharraf) Pakistan's involvement in destabilising our neighbours, is it not time to recognise that we can neither relocate the country to a geography of our liking, nor can we over-run our neighbours? This entails having a bold discussion on how to create a path to normalising relations with our neighbours, as enmity has historically provided legitimacy to outfits that have had little success in over-powering India, but have inflicted irreparable damage to Pakistani society.

Finally, in an increasingly militarised society, historically marginalised communities often bear the brunt of the violence aimed primarily at soothing the fears of the dominant groups. Consider the rather pathetic attempts of racial profiling of Pakhtuns reportedly currently being practised by the Punjab police. It is ironic that state officials who curtail dissent in the name of 'national unity' would so blatantly sow divisions in society through primitive techniques of controlling populations based on identitarian predicates. This example more than any other reveals how knee-jerk reactions to

tragedies, no matter how universal their language, only end up intensifying existing cleavages in society, rather than offering a credible way out of the impasse.

Thus, under the carefully crafted impulse of fear, the public becomes more divided, notwithstanding official claims of unity, unconsciously lending support to the entrenchment of deep ideological, political and military structures against an anonymous enemy. Caught in the vortex of immediacy, we demand easy answers and swift revenge. However, more than a panic-induced search for solutions, we need to ask whether we are posing the right questions. Such a task requires courage, not only because it may disrupt our own deeply held views, but because it may also remove us from the (false) satisfaction provided by the hysterical jingoism consumed by a docile public after every terror attack.

Posing the correct question, then, requires sacrificing our individual and collective certainties about the world we inhabit. If the alternative is authoritarianism, social disintegration and perpetual terror, this shift from fear to courage is a sacrifice worth making.

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**Ammar Ali Jan**

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**P.S.**

The writer is an assistant professor at Punjab University, Lahore and member of the People's Solidarity Forum.

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