

Pakistan: It is our war

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THE war in Pakistan's tribal areas is being fought by Pakistan's army under America's gun and on its orders. Many innocents have tragically died from bombardment from the skies. Therefore, not surprisingly, Pakistanis are angry and most feel it is not their war.

But Pakistan, for its own sake, urgently needs to battle the flames of religious fanaticism lest they consume the rest of the country. This must, however, be done in a manner that is intelligent and principled.

Few Pakistanis have spoken out against the rising tide of fanatical militancy. Even the horrific mass murder of joyous citizens by two suicide bombers during Benazir Bhutto's triumphal return has not led to a full-throated condemnation of extremism.

Normally vocal, urban, educated Pakistanis - whose values and lifestyles make them eligible for slaughter by Taliban standards - are remarkably silent. Do we believe it cannot really happen to us? Are we unwilling to speak because the threat has cloaked itself in the name of religion? Or, are we blinded to the danger by the conviction that the war against the jihadis is America's war?

No one can doubt that there is a creeping Talibanisation of Pakistan's society and economy. The signs are everywhere. The Taliban have taken control in many tribal areas, forcing local government officials to flee. As happened in Afghanistan, the Taliban are now the law. A widely available Taliban-made video shows the bodies of common criminals and bandits dangling from electricity poles in the town of Miramshah, the administrative headquarters of North Waziristan. Girls' schools have been closed. Barbers have been told: shave and die. Traditional folk musicians have fled. Polio vaccinations have been declared haram.

Unvaccinated children are under threat from polio and other diseases because doctors and health workers are being killed.

Taliban vice-and-virtue squads enforce the Sharia, checking, among other things, the length of beards, whether shalwars are worn at an appropriate height above the ankles, and the attendance of individuals in the mosques. Even our history is being attacked, as fanatics trying to emulate their Afghan Taliban brothers attempted to destroy the 2,000-year-old statue of the Buddha in Swat, surely one of the greatest historical monuments in our country. Not surprisingly, tourism in Swat and the Northern Areas has come to a dead halt.

Much of the responsibility lies with the government, which is seen as insincere. Everyone knows that military generals, politicians and incendiary mullahs have been symbiotically linked to Pakistan's politics for decades. Jihadist groups, aimed against India, have long operated with the state's knowledge and support. These alliances have helped various power groups attain their respective goals.

Nations win wars only when there is a clear rallying cause. While the army high command has committed men to battle, and lost well over a thousand of them, they have not told the nation what these men are fighting for. Nor has the enemy yet been given a name - they are merely termed 'miscreants'. There is also well-founded suspicion of government motives. Since the Taliban were Pakistan's creation, and firmly supported by its intelligence agencies, Pakistanis know that the U-turn would not have happened but for America.

The state is also seen as inept. As in the Lal Masjid episode, the government initially refused to identify the enemy. It finally had to do so when the militants went on the rampage. But, instead of acting decisively, the government sought appeasement - a move that made it look weak. When appeasement failed - as it certainly had to - there was a massive use of force leaving large numbers of innocents dead. A situation that could have been dealt with by using minimal force was allowed to fester until it eventually exploded.

The Taliban have won victory after victory because the army leadership has not reacted as it should have. In another country, the beheadings and mutilation of soldiers' bodies would have led to an uproar which that government could have used to drum up support for its subsequent actions. Recall that in 2006, the capture of just two Israeli soldiers by the Hezbollah had been the casus belli for the invasion of Lebanon.

But the capture of nearly 300 Pakistani soldiers led only to public scorn, not sympathy. Initially, an attempt was made to deny that any soldiers had been kidnapped or had surrendered. This soon had to be abandoned. Then, several weeks later, after the BBC interviewed the military officers in the Taliban's captivity, General Musharraf criticised the officers for having surrendered and said that they had behaved unprofessionally. The Taliban have executed three of the soldiers, released a few, and kept most of the rest. The captors say that the army is not interested in having the remaining men back because they are poor people, not from the officer class. This propaganda resonates powerfully with the ordinary soldier.

The demoralisation in the ranks can only be imagined. A once-proud army stands isolated in the war. It is rightly blamed for the collateral deaths of non-combatants, but it is receiving none of the support it deserves from the public for stemming the tide of primitive religious extremism.

The government is not to be blamed alone. The private media, including the so-called 'free' private television channels known for their so-called openness, studiously avoid meaningful discussions on religious extremism. Although there are endless discussions on the wheeling and dealing of succession politics, the enormous damage to the country's social and economic fabric receives scant attention.

This does not mean that the Pakistani public has succumbed to extremism. An overwhelming majority of Pakistan's citizens do not want harsh strictures imposed on their personal liberties. They do not want enslavement of their women, their forced confinement in the burqa, or for them to be denied the right to education.

Instead, they want a decent life for themselves and their children. They disapprove of Islam being used as a cover for tribal primitivism. But there is little protest.

We must understand this. Why is there no mass movement to confront the extremist Taliban of Miramhah and Waziristan, or the violence-preaching extremist mullah in Mingora, Lahore or Islamabad? This is because ordinary people lack the means and institutions to understand, organise, and express their values and aspirations. We do not yet have the democratic institutions that can give politics meaning for ordinary people. Depoliticising the country over the decades has led to paying this heavy price.

To fight and win the war against the Taliban, Pakistan will need to mobilise both its people and the state. The notion of a power-sharing agreement is a non-starter; the spectacular failures of earlier agreements should be a lesson. Instead, the government should help create public consensus through open forum discussions, proceed faster on infrastructure development in the tribal areas, and make judicious use of military force. This is every Pakistani's war, not just the army's, and it will have to be fought even if America packs up and goes away.

It may yet be possible to roll back the Islamist laws and institutions that have corroded our society for over 30 years and to defeat our self-proclaimed holy warriors. But this can only happen if our leaders win the trust of the citizens. To do this, political parties, government officials, and yes, even the generals, will have to embrace democracy, in word and deed. This will ultimately determine whether we become a respectable member of the comity of states, or a pariah extremist state that breeds export-quality terrorism.

P.S.

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