



IDSS COMMENTARIES (64/2005)

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Pakistan at the Forefront of the War Against Terrorism

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14 September 2005

IN the aftermath of the bombings in London in July 2005, Pakistan once again came to the centre of world attention. As some of the suicide terrorists responsible for the bombings had visited Pakistan prior to the London blasts, there was a perception that Islamabad was not doing enough to curb terrorism and extremism in the country despite being in the frontline of the 'global war on terrorism'. However such perceptions reflect impatience and a lack of understanding of the complexities involved in fighting the kind of terrorism that the world is facing today.

Following the September 11 attacks, Pakistan joined the US-led coalition to oust Al Qaeda and its state sponsor, the Taliban from Afghanistan. This was particularly a very difficult decision and a significant policy reversal on the part of Islamabad. The sense of determination and steadfastness with which Islamabad denounced the terrorists and committed troops and other resources to help destroy them in Afghanistan was noteworthy. As of now, the largest number of Al Qaeda operatives, including several of its key leadership, have been apprehended by Pakistan.

The war against contemporary terrorism, however, cannot be fought with military means alone. Pakistan, under President Pervez Musharraf, has rightly reiterated this in a conference in Islamabad on 29 September 2005. Al Qaeda's brand of terrorism is different from anything many national governments had faced before. It has managed to sustain itself with its ability to harness an ideology and exploiting Muslim piety and a profound sense of grievance and transforming it into a rhetoric of revenge and hate against the West. In this context it is important to differentiate between terrorism and religious extremism and to address each with separate strategies. As President Musharraf put it, "while we have to confront terrorism with force, the malaise of extremism has to be handled with care as change cannot be imposed." Ideological wars are protracted and may take decades to decide. This also involves winning the hearts and minds of the people.

Three-tiered approach

President Musharraf also said that the problem of terrorism requires a three-tiered approach in order to be effectively tackled. Firstly, as the transnational terrorism has become a global menace, it is therefore the responsibility of the international community to work together to eradicate the threat. The international community must understand that long-festering political disputes affecting the Muslim world -- the Palestine question and the disputes in

Kashmir to name a few -- have fuelled radicalisation in the Islamic societies the world over. Political deprivation and alienation have led to a sense of loss of empowerment, leading further to hopelessness and despair. The problem is compounded by lack of educational opportunities and poverty.

The July 2005 bombings in London have added another dimension to terrorism. The perpetrators were not from the economically marginalised section of the society. This suggests that the problem could be about unequal treatment and incomplete assimilation into the mainstream societies in the host countries. Therefore it is necessary that the problem of terrorism be addressed holistically. This also means that it is essential to get to the roots of the problem itself. The resolution of the core disputes that have been disturbing the Muslim world, as President Musharraf asserted, “will pull the carpet from under the feet of extremism and terrorism”.

In this context, recent developments on the Kashmir and Palestinian issues are worthy of mention. Islamabad and New Delhi are moving ahead with the composite dialogue encompassing all bilateral issues including Kashmir. There is a tremendous change in the perception about Kashmir in Pakistan. The recent meeting between the foreign ministers of Pakistan and Israel in Istanbul underscores Pakistan’s implicit endorsement of the Gaza pullout as a move that would eventually lead to the establishment of an independent state of Palestine.

Secondly, it is the responsibility of the Muslim world to demonstrate that radical Islamist ideology does not reflect the true meaning of Islam. Muslim societies need to counter the distorted understanding of Islam as championed by some clerics and obscurantists. This point was also underscored by President Musharraf who assured that Pakistan would do what it takes to promote what he calls ‘enlightened moderation’ in Islam. In fact, Pakistan would like to initiate a process to determine how the tenets of Islam can be put in the perspective of the needs of the modern era. “Our aim is to carry out a Muslim renaissance. Let Pakistan be a source of light and a centre of understanding of real values of Islam,” he said. This is a very significant commitment from the leader of one of the key Muslim nations in the world. President Musharraf reportedly intends to follow it up with the leaders of other Islamic countries when he meets with them on the sidelines of the United Nations summit later this month. He is also scheduled to address the American Jewish Congress, which could pave the way for open interfaith dialogue, thereby fostering understanding and harmony among the followers of the various religions.

Thirdly, the threats of terrorism need to be addressed at the domestic level by the respective countries. Pakistan itself has long been a victim of sectarian violence. The government of Pakistan has banned many extremist organisations, and is determined that the banned organisations would not be allowed to regroup under different names. The government has identified radical publications preaching jihad and steps are being taken to ban such publications. There are also policies to prevent mosques and religious educational institutions from being misused by obscurantist clerics. As part of its long term strategy to deal with extremism, Pakistan would ensure that the school syllabus and curriculum shed ritualism and ‘project the true values of Islam’.

President Musharraf is right to say that extremism would take years to be ‘completely curbed’. This would require long term and firm commitment on the part of the governments and political leadership to undermine the appeal of radical teachings. Pakistan understands

the complexities involved in addressing both terrorism and extremism in the country. There are also visible signs that the policies are effective in reducing the support for radicalism and extremism. This was evident from the results of recent local elections in Pakistan. In the North West Frontier Provinces, considered the bastion of extremism for example, the extremist political organisations fared rather poorly compared to their performance in the 2002 general elections. People in Pakistan now speak openly against the radical clerics and other extremist elements in the country.

It would therefore be unfair to be skeptical about the intention of the government in Pakistan. Simultaneously, all nations have an equal responsibility to prevent human beings from turning into human bombs and carriers of death. The world community must lend its helping hand so that Pakistan succeeds in its efforts and emerge as an example of moderation amongst Muslims. This will hopefully help promote the path of moderation as a more attractive option for disenchanted Muslims than the voices of radicalism.

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