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Extremism: Pakistan in Search of a Solution

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Abstract

Pakistan is in agony. In almost 67 years of sovereignty, it has never had political leadership that could foster a national feeling among all citizens. And now a relatively small segment of the population has taken up arms to challenge the authority of the state. When we view Pakistan's experience with extremism through a wide-angle lens, we see that its rise and stubborn presence are the consequences of the coming-together of a number of complex circumstances. It is also clear that the country will not be able to make economic progress unless the various groups that have taken up arms against the state are made to obey the law of the land.

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History played an important role as did public policy in bringing about this situation. International developments were equally important. Although the government, headed by Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif that took office on 5 June 2013, identified 3 'Es' – extremism, economy and energy – as the areas of priority for the making of public policy, it has been wavering in dealing with extremism. It will need a well-defined approach which it should adhere to until this existential threat to Pakistan gets fully addressed.

History's Role

History played an important role – or more accurately several roles – in sending Pakistan towards extremism. It created the enabling circumstances but state failure ultimately set the country on fire. Let us turn to history for a moment. The way the lines of partition were drawn, between the states of India and Pakistan that emerged out of the British Indian colony, proved to be an unsettling demographic event. It produced a wave of migration that resulted in the exchange of population between the two new countries. Some 14 million people moved; eight million Muslims came into Pakistan while six million Hindus and Sikhs left in the other direction.² This transfer of population changed the demographic profile of Karachi. That migration was followed by other waves to the city, which the country's political system was not able to handle. The contending ethnic groups, not being able to settle their differences by the use of political institutions, resorted to violence. Absence of political development has meant that Karachi has become an increasingly violent city. The use of violence as a form of political expression may have first appeared as a phenomenon in Karachi but was not confined to it.

The 1947 transfer of population had one other important consequence. It was in fact an ethnic cleansing before that term entered the language. Non-Muslim segments of the population were replaced by Muslims; by the time the dust settled down, Pakistan was 95 per cent Muslim as against 70 to 75 per cent before independence. This 'Muslimisation' changed the society's

² These estimates were developed by me in the work done under the supervision of Professor Alexander Gerschenkron, one of the distinguished economic historians of the 20th century. This work was reported by me in my first book on Pakistan. See Shahid Javed Burki, *Pakistan Under Bhutto, 1971-77*, London, Macmillan, 1980.

mores. It made the population increasingly intolerant of other religious expressions or sectarian affiliations. Had Hindus and Sikhs stayed behind, they would have undoubtedly exercised a moderating influence on the country Muhammad Ali Jinnah had founded.

Pakistan's geopolitical situation did not help matters, either. The country sits on top of a number of fault-lines. One slight movement in one of them produces tremors that are felt across the country. Pakistan is where Central Asian Sufistic Islam meets with the highly puritan Arab faith, each attempting to influence the other. Pakistan and Afghanistan are two countries where the West used to collide with Russia. It was once called the 'Great Game'. These two countries are likely to become one of the grounds where the growing rivalry between the United States and China is likely to be played – the new 'Great Game'. Pakistan is also the place where increasingly assertive China will meet India, with the latter viewing all of South Asia as its sphere of influence. Pakistan has the largest Shia population in the world after Iran. The way the Arab Spring of early-2011 has morphed has increased tensions between the Sunni and Shia Muslims. They have contributed to the rise of extremist sectarianism in Pakistan. In light of these complex origins of extremist behaviour, how should the policy makers in Islamabad address the problem? Before we take up this question we will briefly discuss the cost of terrorism that has already been paid by the country.

Extremism's Heavy Economic and Social Toll

There are a number of disturbing details about the extent of terrorism in the country and the damage it has done to the economy in an 86-page report, *National Internal Security Policy, 2013-2018*, prepared by the Ministry of Interior. According to one account detailing the content of the report, "from 2001 to 2013, there were 13,271 [terrorist] incidents in Pakistan. From 2001 to 2005, there were 523 incidents but from 2007 to November 2013, the total number of incidents had risen to 13,198". During this time, the extremist organisations changed the

weapons used – for more effective attacks. The number of suicide bombings increased from 15 in 2001-2007 to 358, “the highest in the world”.³

The number of people killed in the 12-year period between 2001 and 2013 was estimated at 48,994, including 5,272 security personnel. Most casualties occurred in the two-year period between 2011 and 2013 when 17,642 people were killed, of whom 2,114 belonged to the security forces. Why this increase? There were probably two reasons. With the elections of May 2013, Pakistan seemed to be settling down politically, with a political order based on Western democratic liberalism. This was not acceptable to Islamic extremists who were bent upon creating a political order that would have worked according to, what they saw as, the dictates of Islam. Also, as the date for the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan drew closer, the Taliban on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan divide saw an opportunity to increase their influence over the Pashtun areas of the two countries.

Terrorism has also created an environment which encourages general lawlessness. The country was spending Rs150 billion (US\$ 1.4 billion or 0.6 per cent of GDP) on policing, but this had not reduced the number of reported cases of crime which were mostly in the urban areas. The crime rate had increased greatly since 2008, the number of reported cases stood at 64,554 (in one of the latest counts). These included petty larceny, robberies, car-jacking and bank hold-ups in most major cities. The crime wave has led to an increase in the number of people who worked for private security agencies – a development we will discuss later in some detail.

The Interior Ministry document provided estimates of the amount of economic loss incurred because of the killings and disruptions caused by terrorism. The total loss since 9/11 was estimated at US\$ 78 billion or about 3.5 per cent of the estimated gross domestic product of US\$ 225 billion in 2012-13. This figure did not include the amount the state was spending on maintaining a large armed force which was estimated at over 600,000. This translated into a ratio of three men and women in uniform for every 100,000 citizens, one of the highest in the world.

³ For a discussion of the use of human body as a weapon see the seminal work of Riaz Hassan, *The use of life as a weapon*.

Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, with 33 per cent of the attacks, was the most-affected region in the country, followed by at Baluchistan 23 per cent, FATA at 20 per cent, and at Sindh, 18 per cent. Punjab, the country's largest province, with four per cent of the counted attacks, was the least affected. That it was largely spared by the terrorists may be one reason why the Punjab-based governing party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), seemed reluctant to move against this challenge to the authority of the state.⁴

According to *Dawn*, which in an editorial commented on the Interior Ministry's document, the document "is an eye opener and a confirmation of long-held suspicions. The cities of Pakistan – not just faraway Fata or obscure corners – have thoroughly been infiltrated by militants of every stripe, local or foreign. The names are as familiar as they are scary – Al Qaeda, Taliban, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi. So are the targets: ethnic, sectarian, provincial, sub-national. It had long been known that some of these groups had infiltrated the main political parties. In Punjab, nearly every political party has followed the lead of PML (N) in learning how to buy off or co-opt sectarian elements for electoral purposes".⁵ There was fear in Lahore, Punjab's capital, that military action by the government in the tribal areas would prompt retaliatory action by the militants in the province's large cities.

Analytical Work on the Cost of Terrorism

The work done by the Interior Ministry notwithstanding, there has been little research on the economic cost of prolonged terrorism in Pakistan. The Lahore-based Institute of Public Policy (IPP) included this subject in one of its annual reports,⁶ and some Islamabad-based institutions have been collecting and disseminating data on the number of terrorist attacks, their geographic distribution, and the human toll they have taken. However, detailed analyses of economic and social costs remain to be done. Here we will deal briefly with four issues: Definition of

⁴ Ismail Khan, 'Pakistan, most terror-hit nation', *Dawn*, 23 February 2014, p. 1.

⁵ *Dawn* (editorial), "'Enemy" of the state' 21 February 2014, p. 8.

⁶ Institute of Public Policy, *State of the Economy: Emerging from the Crises*, Chapter 4, Domestic Environment: Impediments to Growth, Lahore, 2009.

terrorism; various types of cost to the economy of what are designated as terrorist activities; the findings from the work done at the IPP; and one example of the identification of the causes of terrorism using econometric tools.

To discuss the economic and social consequences of extremism and associated terrorism, we must first understand what is meant by these terms. Here the United Nations is helpful. Its 1999 International Convention for the Suspension of the Financing of Terrorism makes reference to any “act intended to cause death or serious injury to a civilian, or to any other person not taking an active part in the hostilities in a situation of armed conflict, when the purpose of such act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a government or an international organisation to do or abstain from any such act”.⁷ This carefully worded definition puts focus on attacks on civilians in order to intimidate those who occupy positions of power.

Direct costs of terrorist activities are not too difficult to measure; as is the case with natural disasters, the value of the physical assets harmed or destroyed can be readily estimated. It is the indirect costs that are harder to measure. According to Adam Klein, in a study done for the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, terrorists can hope to harm economies in various indirect ways: By “reducing consumers’ and firms’ expectations for the future; [by] forcing the governments and the private sector to invest in security measures, which reduce efficiency in vulnerable industries (such as transportation and trade) and redirect investment away from productive economic uses; [and by] altering behaviour by inducing economic actors (consumers, investors, businesses) to avoid areas of perceived risk (either sectors, such as tourism, or geographic areas affected by terrorism)”.⁸

Economics also helps to identify some of the factors that have contributed to the rise of extremism in the country. Most analysts now recognise that income inequality has become a prominent feature of the Pakistani economic landscape. The Gini coefficient – one of the most frequently used measures of inequality – is not especially troubling for Pakistan. This is the case

⁷ See <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/13145.doc.htm>.

⁸ Adam Klein, ‘The Costs of Terror: The Economic Consequences of Global Terrorism’, in *Facts and Findings*, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Berlin, May 2007.

in particular when we compare the country's situation with that of the other states in South Asia. Official numbers and estimates don't tell the full story, however. For the full story to be told, we need to delve a bit into the country's economic past.

Pakistan's economic history was punctuated by three periods of boom – 1963-66, 1980-83, and 2004-07 – each followed by long periods of slow growth. All the boom periods resulted from large foreign capital inflows and a good part of this resource went into the activities that favoured the relatively well-to-do segments of society and relatively better-off regions of the country. Each boom period was the result of public policy that favoured the rich over the poor. Capital and consumption were rewarded over savings and labour. In the last decade or so while the economy grew by only 3.5 per cent a year, consumption increased at a rate of mind-boggling 20 per cent per annum. This increase in consumption came from the withdrawal of capital from investment.

The poor and the deprived don't look at Gini coefficients. They see what is occurring around them. What they see is lavish consumption. Let us look at just one example. The string of wedding halls in Lahore Cantonment's Garrison Club are lit up even when the city's lights are down and are often referred to as the Punjab capital's Las Vegas strip. This does not go unnoticed by those who have to deal with high rates of food inflation, irregular supply of gas and electricity, and lack of job opportunities. There cannot be any doubt that this attracts the poor and the unemployed to the ranks of the terrorists. If the economy does not reward the poor, some of them are likely to vent their frustration by resorting to violence.

Problems with security negatively affect the economy in many other ways. One interesting insight is provided by economists Samuel Bowles and Arjun Jayadev. While their work is concerned with developed countries, some of its conclusions apply to countries such as Pakistan that are faced with a serious security problem. These two analysts correlated inequality with the number they call 'guard labour'. They matched guard labour per 10,000 workers with the incidence of inequality. Their main finding: "However one totes up guard labour in the United States, there is a lot of it, and it seems to go along with economic inequality. States with high levels of income inequality employ twice as many security workers as less unequal states. When we look across more advanced industrialised countries, we see the same pattern: The more

inequality, the more guard labour. Social spending, also, is strongly correlated with guard labour across the nations. There is a simple economic reason here: A nation whose policies result in substantial inequalities may end up spending more on guns and getting less butter as a result”.⁹ The United States with a Gini coefficient of 0.35 has the highest income inequality among developed countries. Denmark with 0.23, Sweden with 0.24, has the lowest. The United States at 160 guard labour per 10,000 workers has the highest ratio among this group of nations. Sweden with 55 has the lowest.

This pattern is also evident in Pakistan. There are no firm estimates for the number of people in Pakistan’s workforce who belong to the category of ‘guard labour’. They are to be seen everywhere in all the large cities in the country. Their presence is now highly visible. In addition to the check points on the roads in the more well-to-do cities in the country, gated communities protected by their own guards are becoming a common sight. Security firms are growing in number and size; this is one part of the service economy that is out-performing all others. To those who provide these functions, we must also add those in the public sector who work in security services – in the military and in the police.

Guard labour does not add to overall productivity and efficiency of the economy. Both are very low for Pakistan. The larger the proportion of people hired by security firms, the lower the number going into productive economic activities. As economists have long argued, an economy develops when the workers engaged in low-productivity activities move to those that are more efficient in terms of the contribution they make to the economy. Those engaged in providing security may be well rewarded but they make little or no contribution to economic welfare. This is one other way in which extremism and terrorism are hurting the economy. There are, in other words, very good reasons why the policy makers must see extremism as a serious economic issue and why they should begin to focus on the ways to make the country more secure. Bringing sustained growth to the economy and distributing its rewards evenly among different segments of the population and different regions of the country must rank high on the policy makers’ ‘to do’ list.

⁹ Samuel Bowles and Arjun Jayadev, ‘One nation under guard’ *The New York Times*, 17 February 2014, p. 17A.

Extremism and associated terrorism have produced a vicious cycle. It hurts the economy by reducing the incentive to invest which in turn lowers the rate of GDP growth. Without growth, the problem of poverty and income inequality cannot be addressed. The long-term growth trend has been pointing downwards creating what appears to be an intractable security problem.

Wavering Approach by the Sharif Government

There are two seemingly short-term solutions and three that will take a longer time to produce satisfactory results. Negotiations with the extremists or the use of overwhelming force – ‘shock and awe’ in the American language – are two options at the opposite ends of the policy spectrum. The first was apparently the preference of the political establishment as expressed in the All Parties Conference held on 9 September 2013. The approach was given operational meaning by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in his long-awaited address in the National Assembly on 29 January 2014. After what appeared to be the building of a case against extremism and the need for the government to assert its authority, the chief executive decided to give the militants “another chance”. He appointed a four-man committee of mostly former bureaucrats to negotiate with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The TTP’s response was a clever one: it initially nominated a five-man committee from the ranks of the leadership of the established right-wing or Islamic parties that had some sympathy for the terrorist organisation’s list of demands. The original list included Imran Khan, president of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) that had done well in the elections of May 2013 and began heading the provincial government in the province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. Khan turned down the Taliban offer as did one other individual on the proposed roster. Those who accepted the offer belonged to the religious groups and parties that believed that *Sharia* should be formally incorporated in the Constitution as the form of governance the country should follow.

The two negotiating groups held meetings starting on 6 February. The TTP negotiating team was taken to meet the TTP shura by government helicopters, and the team returned with a long list of demands that included the withdrawal of the military from the tribal agencies, release of all militant-prisoners, and cessation of American drone strikes. On the government’s side, there was

expectation that the TTP would reduce its terrorist activities. That did not happen. If anything, the intensity increased. On 13 February, the TTP took responsibility for carrying out an attack on a police van in Karachi, where 13 people were killed. Two days later, a Taliban-associated group killed 23 Frontier Constabulary soldiers in Mohmand tribal agency who had been kidnapped a couple of years earlier. The killing of an army major followed in a gun battle near Peshawar. The terrorist organisation provided its reason for these killings. “They said that the Pakistani military had illegally killed suspects in custody in Karachi and Peshawar, and that the 23 captured paramilitary soldiers had been killed in retaliation for that...Over all, Pakistani officials said on 19 February, 2014, 460 people were killed in violence connected to militant activity over the last five months, the period when the government was trying to engage the Taliban in peace talks”.¹⁰

These incidents exhausted the patience of the both the military and seemingly of the civilian authorities as well, at least initially. In a meeting on 18 February, chaired by the prime minister, the government-nominated negotiating committee declared that it could not carry on with the task unless the TTP declared unconditional cease-fire. The TTP responded by demanding that the government needed to move first with the cease-fire. On 20 February, Prime Minister Sharif ordered the military to use fighter planes and helicopter gunships to pound the hideouts of the militants in North Waziristan and Khyber tribal agencies. The government reported that 35 militants were killed in the first day of strikes, but it stopped short of announcing a full-fledged military offensive. General Raheel Sharif, who had taken command at the helm of the Pakistan Army in late-November 2013, was “described by Pakistani and Western officials as robust in comparison with his predecessor, Gen Ashfaq Kayani, who was seen as more circumspect and cautious”.¹¹ The attacks continued on the following day, 21 February 2014, when new hideouts were targeted, with the militants suffering more casualties.

The Sharif government, frustrated by the response it received from the TTP to the offer to negotiate an end to its violent activities, seemed to have decided to use force. This was the approach long urged upon the country by the United States. A front-page story in *The*

¹⁰ Salman Masood and Ihsanullah Tipu Mehsud, ‘Pakistani airstrikes target militants in tribal areas’, *The New York Times*, 21 February 2014, p. A7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Washington Post said that “the Pakistani government was on the verge of launching a major military offensive in the North Waziristan tribal region after brutal Taliban attacks in recent weeks and the apparent failure of peace talks with the militants”. The story quoted a military official as saying that the operation could begin any day and that the “military plans have been shared with the top US officials who have long urged an offensive”. Islamabad had recently received CIA Director John Brennan and General Lloyd J Austin III, head of the US Central Command. “With 150,000 troops already based in the tribal regions, the senior Pakistani official said the government is prepared to begin a full-fledged clearing operation. ‘We really don’t have to start from scratch’. He said an official evacuation had yet to begin but noted that tens of thousands of residents, who he said were ‘spooked’ by reports of an imminent government attack, had left on their own”. Even Imran Khan indicated that military action was inevitable. “Talks would have been a better option”. The *Post* report said that the Muttahida Qaumi Movement had been consulted and was on board.¹²

The slow pace at which the government moved, after having decided to use force to bring the extremists in line, was frustrating to those in the country who had been clamouring for military action for some time. But Islamabad felt it needed to plan carefully before it launched a full-fledged military operation in the areas which the extremist groups had held for a long time and where they had the opportunity to consolidate their position. While initially the government’s response came in the form of attacks launched from the air, military strategists advised that ‘boots on the ground’ would be needed in order to clear the targeted areas. According to Spearhead, a Lahore-based think-tank operated by General (retired) Jehangir Karamat, former Chief of Army Staff, “the air strikes being carried out are effective. All reports indicate disarray within TTP ranks. A ‘boots on the ground’ military operation, however, has to be undertaken and it is this realisation that is prompting arm chair specialists to speculate [about the nature of the operation]. Guaranteed success of such an operation is absolutely vital. For this reason, a joint political-military-foreign policy preparatory manoeuvre is important. This must ensure the support, or failing that, at least non-interference of the US, the Afghan government, Iran, India and the Middle Eastern countries that fund different entities. This manoeuvre must bring the US

¹² Karen DeYoung, ‘Pakistan plans a military push in tribal area,’ *The Washington Post*, 26 February 2014, pp. A1 and A8.

presence in Afghanistan and the Afghan government forces in support of the military by taking mutually coordinated steps on the Afghan side of the Afghan-Pak border. Iran's cooperation and support is especially important. The military operation itself will involve stopping and interdicting all inter and intra-agency movement in FATA, into Afghanistan and into mainland Pakistan as multiple directions are used to clear areas and establish the writ of the government. The care of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the establishment of follow-up civil administration to control and rehabilitate the cleared areas will have to be part of the overall plan".¹³ This operation, no matter which form it took, was likely to take a long time to bring about the required results. It will have economic costs not just in terms of the damage the terrorists are likely to inflict as they retaliate; it will also divert the attention of the senior policy makers away from economic matters.

The Taliban, fearful of a full-fledged military operation, decided to play for time. On 1 March, Shahiullah Shahid, their spokesman, announced that the group was going to observe a month-long ceasefire in order to restart the suspended negotiations. "The senior leadership directs all constituents and groups to respect and fully abide by the cease-fire declaration and restrain themselves from all kinds of jihadist activities", read the statement posted on the internet. While there was no formal government response, Irfan Siddiqui, one of the members of the government-appointed peace-committee called it a "welcome move". The announcement of the truce came just hours after two bombings killed 13 people and wounded 10 in an attack on a polio-vaccination team in the north-western Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province.

Several analysts looked for reasons why the Taliban had offered ceasefire. According to Talat Masood, a retired general and a political analyst based in Islamabad, "the military showed its resolve with surgical strikes and there was likelihood of a military offensive in subsequent weeks". The general also suggested that the Taliban had come under pressure from the Haqqani network and Hafiz Gul Bahadur. According to Salman Masood of *The New York Times*, "the Haqqani network is a feared militant group that operates in Pakistan and Afghanistan and is involved in attacks on American troops in Afghanistan". Washington had long pressured Islamabad to move against the group to ease the pressure on their forces operating in south-

¹³ Spearhead, 'War Drums', Lahore, 28 February 2014.

eastern Afghanistan. This pressure was resisted, largely because of the strong relationship the group had with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, the ISI. The premier Pakistani intelligence agency wanted to keep the Haqqani forces in reserve in case the withdrawal of American forces, due for the end of 2014, plunged Afghanistan once again into a civil war. "Mr. Bahadar, the other possible source of pressure on the TTP, is a local warlord who has maintained truce with the Pakistani military since 2009, and his fighters have not attacked security forces".¹⁴

The government's reaction came a day after the Taliban announcement. The Interior Minister said that the air campaign was being suspended in response to the Taliban's initiative. But it was not clear whether the TTP was in full control of the various groups that operated under its large umbrella. A day after the organisation declared that it was ceasing to fire, a major operation was carried out in Islamabad, the capital city, and in by-far the most-heavily-guarded urban area. According to a newspaper account, "at least 11 people were killed and 25 were injured when unidentified gunmen opened fire and detonated explosives in the Islamabad district court complex...The motive behind the attack, which sent shock waves through the capital, was unclear. Shahidullah Shahid, a spokesman for the TTP, said that 'we have nothing to do with the attack. We have announced a ceasefire, and we will follow it for one month'".¹⁵ The fact that two suicide bombers were involved in the attack suggests the involvement of a well-organised and well-resourced group. It was a cause for concern that the attackers shot and killed a young female lawyer, the only daughter of her parents, at point-blank range. This was reminiscent of the attack on Malala Yousafzai in Swat district in the summer of 2011 – an episode for which Mullah Fazlullah took full responsibility. He was now the formal head of the TTP, having succeeded Hakimullah Mehsud who was killed on 1 November 2013 in an American drone attack.

The responsibility for the Islamabad attack was taken by an obscure cell, calling itself Ahrar-ul-Hind, and thought to be a splinter group of the TTP. The group gave no motive for attack.

¹⁴ Salman Masood, 'Pakistani Taliban, announcing cease-fire, urge the revival of peace', *The New York Times*, 2 March 2014, p. 9.

¹⁵ Salman Masood, 'Deadly suicide attack on court complex rattles Pakistan's capital' *The New York Times*, 3 March 2014, p. A11.

“Afterwards, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif held an emergency meeting with the Army Chief, General Raheel Sharif, and the head of the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, Lt. Gen. Aahir ul Islam. No details of the meeting were made public, and it was unclear what effect the attack might have on often-derailed efforts to open negotiations with the Pakistani Taliban”. This off-and-on approach was bound to lose the government political support – in particular of the middle class – on the basis of which it had won a massive victory in the elections of May 2013.

The magazine, *The Economist*, in its 1 March 2014 issue, offered a correct appreciation of the situation Pakistan faced at the time it wrote the story about the Taliban. The story came with a cartoon that showed Nawaz Sharif bowling to a bearded and turbaned Taliban who was aiming to hit the ball not with a bat but with an AK 47 rifle. The cartoon was a play on the remark by Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan, the Interior Minister, that the TTP might like to participate in a cricket match to foster peace rather than continue to carry out attacks on a variety of targets. A Taliban spokesman demurred, saying that they did not approve of the game, considering it un-Islamic. But cricket was not on the minds of the people who were by then convinced that the government needed to do more than offer a match. “The country’s army, and many civilian critics, say that, with almost 500 people killed since September, Pakistan’s domestic terrorism is out of hand and that the prime minister must take a hard line. The prime minister’s hope of reviving the economy with the help of foreign investment will also be jeopardised by continued violence, they warn. And yet Mr Sharif and many members of his party fear confrontation will trigger horrific retaliation in their political heartland of Punjab, the rich, populous province so far unscathed by militant attacks. They may be right”.¹⁶ This wavering on the government’s part worsened the situation; it gave heart to the extremists that the state does not have the stomach or the political will to take them on with full force. It will pose another kind of existential threat if the impression grows that the Punjab-based ruling party is inclined to protect its province even when many other parts of the country are under severe terrorist assault. This would further weaken the state and compromise nationhood.

There are many reasons why extremism has taken such deep roots in the Pakistani soil. Economic deprivation and growing income inequality are two of the more important ones. But also

¹⁶ *The Economist*, ‘Pakistan and the Taliban: To fight or not to fight’, 1 March 2014, p. 36.

important is indoctrination which has played a major role in Pakistan. For the last several decades – especially after the end of the Soviet Union’s occupation of Afghanistan – highly motivated, indoctrinated and well-trained segments of the population turned their attention inwards, towards the country rather than its perceived enemies outside the borders. The members and sympathisers of these groups have been led to believe that their future depends on their ability to change society’s structure and the laws which have shaped it. They would like to see the state and its institutions to conform to a romantic notion of what they believe is the Islamic way. They have been willing to use violence – often indiscriminately and, most often, with little concern about who was being hurt – to bring about change that would be to their liking.

While the new government has given considerable attention to the problem of extremism, its focus has been on terrorist activities of the groups operating from the tribal areas on the border with Afghanistan. The problem of violence in Karachi has also received some attention but not as much as the activities of the Taliban. The third source of violence – sectarianism – was largely ignored, in part because of the close relations the Saudis have with the Sharif family. There were several high-level visits by the Saudis to Islamabad, and there was an impression that Pakistan, with the largest army in the Muslim world, was being asked by Riyadh to lend support to its favoured groups in the civil war in Syria. A positive Islamabad response to these overtures will plunge the country deep into the Middle East quagmire when it has so many problems of its own.

The State’s Response

To the challenge posed by extremism, the state’s response has been hesitant, tepid and ambiguous. This has only encouraged the forces of extremism to intensify their activities, expand their ambitions and become less accommodating. They see an opportunity in the state’s weakness and resolve which further encourages them to do more and demand more. What is in place now is a vicious cycle, which has to be broken; and that will require the state to develop a comprehensive programme which it must be prepared to implement with total resolve. The state will also need to stay the course and not fall into the traps the terrorist have laid – and will

continue to throw – in the state’s way. One such trap was the month-long ceasefire announced by the TTP on 1 March 2014.

There is now recognition that the rise of extremism has been very costly for the economy. This was indicated in the above-mentioned report of the Ministry of Interior. As discussed above, the cost has materialised in several different ways. There is also now an appreciation that the efforts to revive the economy will come to naught unless extremist forces are brought under control and peace returns to all parts of the country. There are examples from other parts of the world to show that the prevalence of widespread violence has a highly negative impact on economic progress. It is only by bringing it under control that a stalled economy can be made to move again. What economic historians have called the lost decades in Latin America – the 1980s and the 1990s – were in large part the consequence of uncontrolled (and for some time it appeared to be uncontrollable) violence. What should be the main elements of the state’s strategy aimed at checking the rise of extremism? We believe that it should focus on at least the following six policy sub-sets followed by some long-term initiatives.

First, a clear message has to be given to all segments of society that any defiance of the state’s authority and the laws of the land will not go unpunished. This is the reason why negotiating with those who have systematically defied the state can be counter-productive. It shows that the state does not feel it has the strength to enforce the laws on which its own existence depends. The state cannot play cricket as was suggested by the Interior Minister, probably in jest, with those who are operating outside the established legal order.

Second, the public should be provided with full information about the various aspects of extremism. For some reason, the Interior Ministry has chosen to keep under wraps the report it has completed and parts of which have been discussed in the National Assembly. Making it public will increase the awareness of the citizens about the damage extremism has already caused. Increasing this awareness will also prepare the public for the problems which they will have to deal with at an early phase of a well-thought-out plan against extremism. Terrorists are bound to hit back hard once they come under pressure from the security forces.

Third, it should be recognised that the rise of extremism was the consequence of the weakening of the state. In this context, the meaning of the state has to be given a wide interpretation. It should include not only the working of the executive branch but also the judiciary. Lower-level judiciary has not played a constructive role in enforcing the laws that terrorists routinely violate. Terrorists and extremists have been able to intimidate magistrates and judges. The 3 March attack on Islamabad's district court may further make the judiciary more hesitant to deal with terrorism.

Fourth, maintenance of law and order has to be the responsibility of the police, and experience in the developed parts of the world indicates that those police forces are effective that are accountable to the elected local authorities. In Pakistan, police's management is highly centralised, with little stake in preserving peace in local jurisdictions to which its personnel are sent. In Punjab, for instance, the provincial police force is under the control of the Inspector General, an official, located in Lahore and belonging to the Police Service of Pakistan.

Fifth, it should be clearly indicated to all citizens that changes in the state's structure and the laws and regulations on which it is based can only be brought about as a result of legislative action. The use of force cannot be accepted as the means for achieving this end. This means the Constitution is a document to which all citizens must pay total respect.

Sixth, the government must get as close to the people as possible. Even the provincial governments are too far from the local communities to be effective in delivering the services citizens demand. A serious and sustained effort needs to be made to satisfy people's aspirations. In a society where the youth account for a significant proportion, opportunities have to be created to provide productive employment. It is only community-based organisations that can develop and implement programmes for the economic and social uplift of the local population. Unfortunately Punjab, the country's most populous province, has moved in the opposite direction. It has abandoned the system of devolution President Pervez Musharraf had introduced under the Local Government Ordinance of 2001, in favour of a structure that would allow the provincial capital almost total authority over local councils. The Musharraf system had created the office of the *Nazim*, an elected official who had full authority over officials sent out to his area by the provincial government.

The long-term approach has three elements that would begin to change the system of beliefs and social values, provide economic opportunities for the youth, and reduce personal and regional income disparities. The first will involve the modernisation of the system of education and a fundamental change in the way religious seminaries operate. The curriculum they follow must conform to those taught in non-religious schools. A major effort will have to be made to produce textbooks that accurately reflect the country's history, inspire respect for all beliefs and systems of values and place emphasis on the teaching of Science, Mathematics and English. Second, in designing public policies for rescuing the economy – an effort in which the Planning Commission is currently engaged as it is preparing what it calls the '2025 Vision' – job creation has to be given a high priority. Third, the government needs to redefine the role of the state by limiting it essentially to large infrastructure projects and regulation of private enterprise. Most of the enterprises currently under the government's control should be handed over to the private sector. This will result in shedding of the employees who were recruited in the public sector for political reasons or in return for the 'rents' the employers charged. However, if the economy picks up – as it should – it should create opportunities for the temporarily-unemployed.

Conclusion

The government's initial approach in favour of dialogue with the extremists was a non-starter and turned out to be that way. Negotiations can yield results only when the two or more contending parties have something to give. By definition, extremists are unlikely to yield ground, and the state cannot possibly compromise and yield space that would result in weakening it. The state, after all, represents the will of the large majority of the population. It must demand total allegiance to the basic law (the Constitution) under which it operates. Any challenge to it such as the one posed by the TTP, cannot be accepted. The use of force is necessary to ensure that those operating outside the accepted legal framework come into it or are completely pushed back. While the debate goes on in the country about the wisdom of the government in negotiating peace with a banned terrorist organisation, it would be appropriate to reflect on why a bunch of backward, mostly illiterate leaders has managed to acquire so much power. Those who are opposed to the idea of negotiating peace with a group that refuses to swear allegiance to the

Constitution correctly argue that the mere fact of sitting down at the table with group's representatives gives them the status they don't deserve. If Pakistan fails to bring extremism and violence under control it will end up paying a heavy price in terms of the state's integrity. There are analysts who have begun to suggest that the country has begun to unravel.

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