**Capitulation?**

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In his first-ever decree issued after the induction of the Taliban’s government in Kabul in mid-August, Mulla Hibatullah Akhund, the Ameerul Momineen of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), ordered the formation of a three-member commission to look into Pakistan’s issue with Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The commission, after days of deliberation, asked Pakistan to hold talks with the group.

Talks had virtually started with TTP splinter groups much before President Arif Alvi and Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi spoke of amnesty to Pakistani Taliban last month. Prime Minister Imran Khan’s latest announcement of holding talks with the group several days back was also just an official confirmation of that – and of course, a revelation that the parleys continued inside Afghanistan.

There is a heavy backlash from the opposition and the media ever since.

Holding talks with rebels is neither anything new nor bad enough. The Philippines government held successful talks and signed a peace agreement with Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Kuala Lumpur in 2014. History is replete with many other such talks and agreements in many countries of the world. Conflicts and rebellions cannot endure for long.

Working relationship with whosoever rules Afghanistan is also a compulsion of Pakistan. None of the countries surrounding Afghanistan is as much affected by the good or bad situations in that country like Pakistan.

Goodwill is always reciprocal. If we can prevail upon them to broaden the base of their government in line with the demand of the international community, we may also give them the right to make some demand of us.

TTP commander, Mufti Noor Wali, has expressed the resolve to set up an independent state in the tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

However, decisions of this magnitude require a careful examination of all pros and cons. In a democratic dispensation like ours, the parliament and civil society are also taken into confidence before launching any project of that proportion.

About 2200 Pakistani Taliban were released from Pul-e-Charkhi Jail in Kabul when the government of Ashraf Ghani collapsed as Taliban knocked at the threshold of the city on August 15. These also included TTP’s deputy chief, Maulvi Faqir Mohammad, who vowed after his release that his group would continue to work for the enforcement of Islamic Shariah in Pakistan.

Another TTP commander, Mufti Noor Wali, has even gone to the extent of expressing the resolve to set up an independent state in the tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Last month, the Pakistani Taliban also warned journalists to refrain from using the term “terrorist” for them otherwise “they will be treated as enemies.”

It is rather a matter of concern, and ought to be raised with the Afghan Taliban, that while the TTP remained dormant for quite some time, it has resurrected as terror acts ever since the success of the Doha process. Nine more splinter groups have joined the TTP conglomerate ever since the signing of the peace agreement between the US and Afghan Taliban.

In a media statement in early September, TTP claimed to have carried out 32 terror attacks during August, killing 38 people.

Their attacks have rather picked speed and intensity after that. They have also changed the pattern of their attacks. Previously, the Taliban preferred to cause large-scale destruction by targeting public crowds but now they are focusing on security forces’ vehicles and personnel.

They have also broadened the ambit of their attacks. Previously more attacks in Balochistan were claimed by Baloch separatist groups while the TTP usually restricted itself to the tribal belt and big cities. Now, the group has claimed responsibility for several attacks against security forces in Balochistan.

As soon as the Taliban took reins of power in Kabul, Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmad boasted that terrorist activities had subsided in Pakistan as the flow of RAW funds had stopped after the change of government in Afghanistan. The TTP responded within days; mounting a big attack on an FC convoy in Quetta, killing four personnel and injuring 18 others. Another attack was made in South Waziristan.

The very next day after Prime Minister Imran Khan announced talks with “some” of Taliban groups and the simultaneous announcement of North Waziristan-based Shura-e-Mujahideen of Hafiz Gul Bahadur to hold a 20-day truce, five security personnel were killed in a terror attack in the same district-a message that neither talks had any meaning for the militants, nor the truce declared by one group could make any difference.

Talks have been held with the Taliban in the past as well. But conditions laid by the group were so tough that any agreement would have just marked their victory. They have been demanding demilitarisation of the tribal areas while reserving the right to retain weapons.

Successful terror attacks of the Taliban have also boosted the spirit of their sympathisers inside major cities. When a party of Islamabad police visited Jamia Hafsa of Lal Masjid last month to lower the Afghan Taliban’s flag mounted over the female seminary, Maulana Abdul Aziz, the patron of the seminary, warned them that “Taliban will come – Pakistani Taliban – and make an example of you.”

Havoc would have been inflicted if any politician or journalist had ridiculed the writ of the state that way.

There is an argument that if America can hold talks with the Afghan Taliban, then why not Pakistan with TTP. There is much difference. Afghan Taliban fought against an intruding foreign army while TTP has challenged the writ of the Pakistani state.

Talks or amnesty, if there are any on the cards, must be across the board, not excluding Baloch militants or even renegade political workers. That would rather send positive signals to the international community about civil and political rights in Pakistan.

Finally, what the state does must be from a position of strength, rather than capitulation to non-state vigilante or militant groups.

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