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**The Republic versus an emirate**

As the Afghanistan fiasco deepens, many important voices have sought to understand and analyse the day-to-day situation in Afghanistan, and how Pakistan should handle the challenges posed by what looks increasingly like a civil war in that country.

In my exchanges with Ejaz Haider, who continues to write on the topic with great depth and insight, I have sought to draw attention to the complexities of trying to devise national security responses to what are complex social, political and economic phenomenon, both domestic and foreign. As a wider debate about what is happening in Afghanistan and how Pakistan should respond to events has unfolded, one of those domestic challenges has emerged more insidiously than any other. This domestic challenge is easy to identify but hard to define. So let us attempt to frame a few questions that may help.

How can retired and serving officials smirk with glee at the prospects of the so-called defeat of Western powers in Afghanistan, whilst also benefitting from those same Western powers?

How can any retired senior official that has spent a lifetime serving the people of the country through the constitutional framework of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan publicly express admiration for the Taliban?

How can educated, sophisticated, wealthy, English-speaking Pakistanis in their fifties and sixties forward WhatsApp messages extolling the virtues of Taliban justice as a more viable option for dealing with kidnappings than the police, courts and prison system in the country?

In short, what is up with this whole romance for the Taliban in Afghanistan?

For decades, many Westerners have attributed the Pakistani state’s alleged proclivity for right wing warriors in Afghanistan to an ideological addiction to religious nationalism. But Pakistan’s first war on terror should also have cured Islamabad and Rawalpindi of this addiction. More importantly, the idea of a free-for-all, anti-women, brutality-first governance model has no basis in any of the five Islamic schools of thought (Shafi’i, Hanbali, Maliki, Hanafi or Jafari), nor in the school-avoidance Salafi approach. For twenty years now, most Muslim voices around the globe have pleaded that hardliners like the Taliban represent neither the aspirations of the Muslim people, nor of the traditions or rituals of Islam.

Yet what we observe is the growing appeal of an angry and often vicious discourse that claims not only ownership of Islam, but also of the idea of the nation. In Pakistan, the language and attitudes that used to be the exclusive domain of the religious right are now considered mainstream, and no mainstream voices dare to challenge this angry, new orthodoxy. The best domestic manifestation of this new ‘thing’ is the social, political and cultural phenomenon of the Tehreek e Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). The whimsy of perfumed and shaven Pakistani uncles extolling the virtues of the Taliban’s “simplicity” and “integrity” is a manifestation of the same flex as the TLP – just extended or superimposed on Afghanistan. Of course, rule number one for guys with post-modernist eyes is that what seems new is probably old. And so it is with this Taliban lovefest ‘thing’. These same uncles and their ilk have spent nearly forty years yearning for an Ayatollah that would “just do it”, “just clean up the country”. No matter how Sunni they are, or how Shia Iran is. One would cite irony – but there can be no irony in a land of black and white fairy tales. And the myth of a glorious Taliban is the best fairy tale ever told to Pakistanis.

Simpleton binaries may feel good, but they are largely useless. Of course, we can blame Pindi for a lot of ills – but is there a discourse generating machine somewhere in Fortress Pakistan that just makes people stupid and self-effacing? Probably not. This ‘thing’ for the Taliban is anchored in more than just religiosity, or anger toward the Americans, or post colonial rage, or a post modernist intellectual omelette. It may even be a little bit simpler than all this.

In The Guardian’s ‘The new populism’ series, Peter Baker wrote that “we can’t really talk about populism without talking about our conflicting conceptions of democracy – and the question of what it truly means for citizens to be sovereign”. But no one believes that the Taliban are a populist phenomenon. They really aren’t. At least, not in Afghanistan. In Pakistan? It is complicated.

Some in the mainstream media and retired officialdom says it openly and without hesitation, others are more circumspect – but it is hard to escape the feeling that too many Pakistanis are expressing an admiration for the Taliban that is a product of issues- and feelings-conflation. The issues many Pakistanis have are with the existing ‘system’ of governance. The feelings many Pakistanis have for this ‘system’ are fatigue and certainty about its uselessness. Anything that is so frontal in its assault of this system will be viewed with a degree of sympathy. What could be more of an affront to a republic than the Taliban?

The questions posed at the beginning of this article don’t have definitive answers. However to engage with those questions soberly and with honesty would require democrats and federalists like me to contend with a decade-long failure: the inability to connect the idea of federalism with the idea of democracy, and the failure to connect the idea of democracy with the idea of the republic. These two concurrent and connected failures have helped incubate a grand theory of change within the Pakistani deep state, and the security establishment, as well as among many that are sceptical of ‘democracy’ with a capital N and three Ps.

What is this grand theory of change? That to fix what ails Pakistan requires a dismantling of three things. One, the fiscal federalism that shapes the 7th National Finance Commission Award. Two, the cabinet and parliamentary system that demands consensus and debate (and sometimes, dysfunction) in favour of a presidential system that is ‘smoother’. And, three, the power of provinces, as constituent units within the federation, to make autonomous money (what to do with theirs) and policy (how to do it) decisions.

Since the 18th Amendment, many democrats and federalists have been utterly dismissive of the need for introspection and critique of the federalist project in Pakistan. Part of this hesitation is the PTSD that democrats have suffered through multiple decades-long assaults on Pakistani freedoms – the Ayub era, the Zia era and the Musharraf era. Part of the hesitation to engage in debate has been rooted in intellectual snobbery. Part of the hesitation is straight up guilt. No democrat will openly admit to agreeing with political party structures that have been inured to voice and representation from within the party, in favor of family dynasties.

In the last three years, even if there had been no hesitation, a free and full-blooded debate would in any case have been impossible – given the restrictions on discourse and debate – whose cost is manifest in the pages of the Washington Post op-ed section through Hamid Mir’s column, The Guardian and The Observor’s reporting on Pakistani dissidents and the concurrent (but unrelated) buoying of sentiment among long-time Pakistanophobes from the West.

There is now an urgent need for Pakistanis of disparate political persuasions and starkly different ideologies to ground the country’s discourse around democracy and federalism in the idea of the Pakistani republic. Romance for the Taliban is informed by a feeling of desperation and a surrender to the failure of the republic. The notion of an Islamic Republic is only exciting and invigorating for those of us capable of suspending the burden of what exists, from the lightness of what could be. But this ideal republic – a place that is safe and happy, for all its people – requires a compact among the elites. What is happening in Afghanistan is the epic collapse of an elite compact lasting for over two generations. Pakistanis should be humble (and scared).

Irony may be hard to swallow, but it can be instructive. In the fight between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, who should be the natural ally for the Islamic Republic of Pakistan? The fact that so many icons of the Pakistani republic have an unnatural predilection for an emirate, whilst sipping on the virgin pina coladas of their own republic, is worth deep and serious reflection.

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