**Schools under attack**

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Schools in Nigeria and Pakistan are at risk from the growing threats of militant attacks. In 2022, the Global Coalition for Protecting Education from Attacks (GCPEA) reported seven attacks on schools by militants in Pakistan, a decline from 34 schools attacked in 2018-19.

However, there is again an uptick in such attacks with the presence of the TTP in North Waziristan and other newly merged districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This comes in years after they were contained through military operations against them.

In Nigeria, the GCPEA counted 10 attacks on schools and over 14,000 student abductions from various states. This may be associated with the rise in movements of militant groups.

Pakistan stands vulnerable to militancy and has recently started accusing the Afghan Taliban setup of not doing enough to stop backing the TTP in the attacks carried out here. However, as has been pointed out by many civil rights and political activists and journalists here, the re-grouping of militants in the country is not a new development as the group was openly allowed to get rehabilitated and reorganize.

In Nigeria, Boko Haram is an evolution of what has been known as the Nigerian Taliban. With scholars and historians divided over its origins, the movement against the state started in the northeast local government area of Kanamma of Yobe state in 2003. At that time, no direct connection could be found between Al-Qaeda operatives and the actions of this new group. However, what was relatable between the two was the ideology of puritanical religion and a distaste for anything considered Western.

A religious nationalist idea that prevailed provided for shared motivations though it was not necessarily the same entity. Nigerian Scholar Audu Bulama Bukarti believes that the nomenclatures for this movement, the Nigerian Taliban, may be the result of stereotypical portrayal in the media that may have linked this group’s formation with the Afghan Taliban and thus gave a false impression of the spread, whereas, in reality, there is little evidence to support this.

However, it is important to note that the violent demand for Shariah to replace state laws became the premise for their revolt against the state and the Nigerian government. It was not, at that time, a concern of Al-Qaeda or the ISIL, which have a strong presence in the neighbouring Sahel region comprising borders of Lake Chad Basin, Cameroon, Niger, Burkina Faso and Nigeria, also considered a hotbed of Jihadist groups who launch attacks and infiltrations, or are in-fighting over territorial claims.

The traction that this particular movement in the Yobe state of northern Nigeria caught that later resulted in thousands of casualties and attracted military interventions to control and contain the situation could have been caused by enabling factors that were prevalent there. The external jihadist groups might have only aided at a later stage to facilitate a commonality in the ambitions they seek in establishing a state.

Boko Haram has widely been curtailed, and normalcy has finally returned in northeast Nigeria. However, movements detected in and near schools in some communities caused temporary school closures as pre-emptive steps. The memory of how Boko Haram terrorized communities and schools is still fresh with residents.

Just recently, in the Kaduna state in Nigeria, around 247 school children were kidnapped by abductors, which is very similar to the situation when scores of girl students were kidnapped by Boko Haram militants in the Chibok community in Borno state in 2017. It is not clear if the recent abductions in Kaduna have been carried out by the same militant group.

So what makes ‘Talibanization’ or militancy gain traction here in Pakistan even if there is a shift in policy towards them by changing governments? At the community level, the Taliban work by instrumentalizing the indigenous and nationalist political aspiration of people within a country, and unintentionally ends up serving the purpose of external wider militant groups attempting to spread out for global or wider regional control, as we have seen in the African context.

Religious nationalism becomes a convenient tool for militants to impose this ideology through hegemonic and authoritarian means, provided the mindset of their recruits also adheres to it.

The Taliban in Afghanistan may digress from Al-Qaeda or ISIS’ ulterior control objectives for domination and control. However, this digression is based on their practical want of staying away from military backlash, but they do provide an amicable ground for their militants to launch their proxies.

The first motivation of militant groups is to lay siege to the thought of people which they find in contravention to their hardened ideologues. Heavy propaganda through print and social media is not a new tool for them. In doing so, to kill any idea of critical or diverse thinking in populations, they spread terror and hold no bars in targeting schools or any seminary that breaks away from old conventions of learning.

Unbeknownst to the governments that take up the matter of forging state narrative through textbooks, more harm is being done by not allowing communities and children to open up to diversity of thought. This acknowledgement is vital for society to understand that today’s children will be able to safeguard Pakistan’s interests by shunning regressive and violent ideologies during their formative and adult life.

But if the fixated growth of the mind is the aim of the state, then it comes as no surprise to find even educated classes supporting militancy. This may be due to denying diverse literature to students and making critical thinking in children an undeclared crime by the state. The state must work to diversify knowledge streams and not subject people to only one thought process that it wants to promote.

With lack of exposure of students to different realities and literature, they will become easy prey to militant ideologies. Because to them, critical thinking is a sinful crime.

In Pakistan, the state owns the narrative and focuses on a single Islamic identity. This makes for a perfect gateway for militants to infiltrate and further brainwash recruits. There may be external proxies causing terror attacks, but the mindset with which our citizens are becoming recruits is an internalized problem that needs to be fixed first.

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