**FATF Unshackles Pakistan**

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On October 21, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), a global money laundering and terrorism financing watchdog, removed Pakistan from its grey list, which was meant for increased monitoring of a suspected, non-compliant country. With that, Pakistan’s international politico-economic credibility has improved.

It had been an appalling reality that madrassas begged for alms from society to run their affairs, but some of them nurtured an army of militants to dictate their terms on the locals residing in the suburbs of the same mosque or madrassa. That is, a system of nursing on charity assumed the status of strength to dictate its terms to society. The system was powerful enough to exploit religion in its favour unchallenged and unscathed. Consequently, religious militants became a force to reckon with. Brandishing sophisticated arms and resorting to aerial firing on one pretext or the other was to browbeat any perceived local opponents. The nearby police stations remained compelled to foster amicable relations with such madrassas. The religious leader became an open interventionist and an undeterred adjudicator.

Terror turned out to be contagious. Local criminal armed gangs surfaced. Many of them masquerading as religious outfits wreaked havoc on society: mullah in the daytime and bandit at night. Every nathu khara got invigorated to carry weapons. Illegal arms and illicit (non-custom paid) vehicles swamped the streets. Even fake arms licenses infested cities. Cantonments and defence housing societies might have experienced calm, but the civilian urban areas became hell to live in. Under-equipped and under-trained, the police were rendered a compromised bystanders.

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Tyranny was that the madrassa system got fed with foreign money channelled into Pakistan under the rubric of Zakat (religious charity), mostly from the Middle East, or through an alternative route anchored in some European country. The itinerary was a ruse to delude the tracer. In Pakistan, between the recipients of remitted charity, there appeared a tug of war. Mosques and madrassas were proliferated, even in Lahore and its suburbs, to receive more and more external funds. The charity was easy money unaccountable to taxation. Tummies got bloated. The workers, who were also beneficiaries, used fake money-collecting receipts just to showcase that the locals were generous to donate funds. The effort was to feign legitimacy.

Sectarianism was one off-shoot of the accursed phenomenon of foreign funding for the purpose of charity. The added curse of weaponization marred the social fabric of Pakistan. With the FATF taking action against Pakistan, and Pakistan taking action against militant outfits and their financial mainsprings, incidents of sectarian violence have almost vanished. Criminal gangs have waned. Society is experiencing tranquillity.

In essence, the FATF is an instrument to make countries stick to a system of regulation and comply with international norms. Pakistan learnt this lesson the hard way. FATF’s grey list entangled Pakistan first time in 2012. Banned militant organizations went underground and internationally proscribed personalities ran into hiding. The mere appearance was avoided, though the reality persisted underneath and gave a different story. The connection between the targeted banned personalities and certain state institutions was so strong that the personalities were rescued and protected. The banned organizations found a way to reappear under a new identity and title. To seek renewed legitimacy, most such organizations got themselves registered as performing work in the field of education, health, and social welfare.

During the Cold War (1945-1991), with alacrity, Pakistan worked as a proxy state. The whole Pakistani system, both military and bureaucracy, got trained as proxy institutions. Being experts at proxyism, they also encouraged the same phenomenon in the country. Religious fanatics and militant organizations evolved as eager end-users. Proxies hired proxies to serve a given purpose.

In 2015, Pakistan wriggled out of the grey list, but it was not a guarantee of permanence. The world was not imprudent to be hoodwinked by the local intellect. This was the reason that, in 2018, when the FATF re-engaged with Pakistan, harsh conditions were put. Pakistan was handed over two action plans, comprising 34 points (27 and 7), asking Islamabad to bring in laws on money laundering and against terrorism financing in line with international requirements. Pakistan was asked to fulfil all substantial, technical and procedural requirements of both the 2018 and 2021 Action Plans. Pakistan remained in the throes of the FATF imposing conditions for the financial survival of Pakistan. Now, FATF’s satisfaction with Pakistan’s compliance with the given action plans through reforming its system is propitious. Pakistan has travelled a significant distance in formulating policies, developing procedures and enacting laws meant for curbing money laundering and combating terrorism financing. As per FATF’s declaration, Pakistan is now a responsible player in global efforts for discouraging malpractices.

Under the guidance-cum-coercion of the FATF, Pakistan had to reform itself. Pakistan could do the same on its own. This is what is demanded by every citizen: reform the system. Make it democratic, transparent and accountable. Taking refuge in the constitution, the pronounced sacred cows have problematized the country instead of solving its problems. Amend the constitution, and make everyone answerable. No exception is acceptable.

The Cold War ended two decades ago, but not in Pakistan’s mind and heart. Pakistan has to understand that the freelance beneficiary era is over. Pakistan has to improve its economy more than Pakistan’s efforts to cash in on its geo-strategic importance. The world has gone more materialistic than ideological. Religious fanatics are no more the state’s assets. Don’t let FATF come back with a new vengeance. Pakistan has to shed its proxy mentality. Pakistan is in no need of becoming a proxy, nor does Pakistan need proxies to make its foreign policy objectives fulfilled. If permitted to work, Pakistan’s foreign office is capable of meeting foreign policy objectives and making the country’s voice heard in the world.

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