**Is FATF biased towards Pakistan?**

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It’s been a roller-coaster ride for Pakistan since it was put on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list in 2018. The first time the country found itself there was back in 2008 and then again in 2012. Pakistan has fought tooth-and-nail to fulfil all 27 parameters required by the organisation. It was able to comply with all but one. The global financial watchdog also slapped Islamabad with 6-pointer supplementary guidelines.

Pakistan, the FATF judged, still needs to do more to curb financing of those groups that the UN Security Council designates terror outfits; as well prosecuting and convicting banned persons; and combating drugs and precious stone smuggling until the most recent evaluation. Islamabad has, however, taken action such as prosecuting Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) head Hafiz Saeed and his accomplices. The discriminatory approach of international organisations is a way to build political and economic pressure on Pakistan.

Unfortunately, in today’s globalised world such institutions and their rulings are directly linked to the international standing of a state. FATF’s ruling also falls into this category since it raises the country’s risk profile, making it more difficult for the government and business sector to interact with international financial markets. Being on the grey list requires domestic and multinational institutions to devote additional resources to building a more transparent system adding more strain to existing economic conditions.

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India, Pakistan’s arch-foe, has long urged the FATF to impose more stringent restrictions on the country. Since 2018, the watchdog has acknowledged the Islamabad’s efforts towards achieving a comprehensive approach to countering terror-financing and money-laundering. Yet, Pakistan is still made to stay on the danger list where it is strictly monitored. Indeed, the Asia Pacific Group (APG) which is partnered with FATF, needs to be renamed the ‘Pakistan Pacific Group’ since it has demonstrated partisan approach towards this country. For the APG appears to turn a blind eye to the atrocities in Indian-held Kashmir as well as New Delhi’s recent mishandling of the question of uranium trafficking.

The FATF judgement comes at a time when the US is attempting to depart from Afghanistan by this September. It would like to have access Pakistan’s airbases as well as airspace to track and strike terrorist groups in Afghanistan, such as Al Qaeda. Prime Minister Imran Khan, on the other hand, has flatly refused — “absolutely no” — a response that Washington is not used to hearing. Global powers rely on the FATF as a political instrument to exert pressure on nations like Pakistan. Other jurisdictions have been delisted from the global watchdog’s enhanced monitoring programme while doing considerably less than Islamabad to improve control over dubious capital flows.

The response of FATF’s president, Marcus Pleyer, on the question of whether Pakistan will be delisted after it has fully complied with all 27 pointers, underscored prevailing bias. He said: “However, in this situation, we have a second action plan containing all of the action items from the first. Pakistan must next essentially complete all of the items on this action plan, after which a separate on-site evaluation will be conducted to determine the action plan. So, before the FATF members vote on withdrawal, both action plans must be fulfilled, and both onsite appraisals must be approved and completed successfully, demonstrating that the changes are durable.” Therefore, Pakistan will not even be considered for delisting unless the interests of big power are served first.

Sadly, the recent blast in Lahore is just another tactic to demoralise the country globally. According to the authorities, those responsible belong to a powerful anti-Pakistan group. The timing of the attack was scheduled to pre-emptively endorse FATF’s while keeping Pakistan on guard in case it fails to surrender to the great powers.

According to the research paper ‘Bearing the cost of Global Politics: The Impact of Grey-Listing on Pakistan’s Economy’ by Dr Naafey Sardar, the FATF’s decision to keep Pakistan on the grey list has incurred a staggering economic loss of $38 billion from 2008-2019. Thus, Pakistan’s law enforcement agents must join hands with the international community to track down, suspend, and seize assets of the specified people and companies. More political will is required to implement these two action plans, as the government is incurring significant expenses due to failure to do so. To avoid the catastrophic repercussions of delay and inactivity, Islamabad must move quickly to meet the remaining criteria.

It’s time for Pakistan to firmly defend the national interest and refuse to submit to pressure by organisations and big powers that are only interested in their own regional ambitions. However, FATF’s turning a a deaf ear to what is going on in -held Kashmir and India’s facilitating of terrorism in Afghanistan has disappointed the masses and they have lost trust in the watchdog.

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