

Problems of combating Islam

OP-ED



DR HASAN-ASKARI RIZVI

The government's partnership with the MMA should not be allowed to come in the way of implementing the declared policy on combating religious extremism and terrorism. Pakistan's credibility as a moderate Islamic state is at stake

THE RECENT TERRORIST ATTACKS IN KARACHI and the on-going confrontation in Wana in South Waziristan have created such a difficult situation that the president, prime minister and the security-intelligence establishment will have to adopt an unambiguous policy towards Islamic extremism and terrorism. The change of chief minister in Sindh does not offer an adequate solution to the problem. The previous chief minister worked in harmony with the federal authorities on this issue and the new CM in all likelihood would pursue the same approach. Therefore, the political change in Sindh does not in any way improve the government's capacity to cope with extremism and terrorism.

Similarly, if the rumour about the replacement of Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali materialises, it would not enhance the government's capacity to combat extremism and terrorism since Jamali is an ardent supporter of President Musharraf's policy on controlling terrorism.

The speculations about his removal are the product of factional politics in the ruling Pakistan Muslim League and the over-ambitious agenda of some political leaders. These leaders put much faith in their self-cultivated links with the army establishment and the good will of the international forces with political interests in and around Pakistan. Indeed, any major political changes at this stage could add to the uncertainties about the sustainability of the present political order and its capacity to cope with extremism and terrorism.

If the government wants to effectively control religious extremism and terrorism, it has to take a holistic view of the political situation and adopt a clear approach towards the sources and instruments of extremism and terrorism. There has to be as little gap as possible between the rhetoric and the policy of combating religious extremism and terrorism. Another requisite is the consistency of policy to pro-

duce a cumulative effect. Inconsistency in policy is often caused by a lack of clarity about the goals and strategies and the dictates of power politics.

The government of Pakistan adopted the first set of firm measures against militant-sectarian parties a month before the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001. It joined the global efforts for combating terrorism on the initiative of the US and in accordance with the United Nations resolutions. President General Pervez Musharraf's speech on January 12, 2002 reiterated his government's deter-

mination to root out extremism, sectarianism and terrorism from Pakistan. The new measures included outlawing of more Islamic-sectarian and militant groups, monitoring of sources of funding of Islamic groups and seminaries, and a new policy to regulate and reform the curricula of Islamic seminaries.

This was a good and determined beginning. But the government did not follow up these measures in any consistent manner. Several considerations led the government to relent on militant Islamic groups which caused ambiguities in its policy of combating religious extremism and terrorism. The goal of combating religious extremism conflicted with the official policy of supporting insurgency in Indian-administered Kashmir through extremist Islamic groups. During 2001-2003, Pakistan's Kashmir policy forced the government to periodically backtrack on its strident approach towards religious extremism. The government needed some of the extremist groups for pursuing the 'jihad' strategy in Kashmir. The change in Pakistani policy on Kashmir towards the end of 2003 has increased the government's options for dealing with these groups.

Another constraint on the government policy is the need to cultivate a working relationship with the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), an alliance of six Islamic parties, to sustain the civilianised political order created by General Pervez Musharraf in October-November 2002. The government's policy to combat Islamic extremism and terrorism conflicts with the MMA's favourable disposition towards Islamic groups. The MMA is opposed to the official policy of cooperation with the United States for combating terrorism in Afghanistan and elsewhere. It takes a strong exception to the government policies for restricting the activities of militant Islamic groups and does not want the government to interfere in the working of Islamic seminaries.

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However, the government and the MMA cooperate with each other as reluctant partners because they have

a shared goal of sustaining the current political arrangements. This helps Musharraf to restrict the role of the mainstream political parties like the PPP and the PMLN and liberal political forces because they question his right to rule. Thus the imperatives of staying in power have led Musharraf to develop partnership with the MMA which is part of the problem of Islamic extremism. If Musharraf adopts a forthright approach towards the MMA in pursuance of his policies on combating religious extremism and terrorism, he is likely to lose the MMA's support, which would threaten the continuation of the current political arrangements.

The government's problems are also caused by the complexity of the world of Islamic elements in Pakistan, all of whom do not subscribe to religious extremism and militancy. There are four known layers of Islamic elements: the MMA and other Islamic political parties, sectarian and militant groups, a host of diverse Islamic seminaries, and those Pakistanis and foreigners who were involved with the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. These Islamic elements are not necessarily linked with each other but share an Islam-oriented worldview.

The MMA and some other Islamic parties contest elections and are not directly involved in Islam-based extremist and militant activities. But they support the politico-cultural ambience that promotes orthodoxy and religious intolerance. They are opposed to reforming Islamic seminaries and some of the MMA parties use Islamic seminaries as their close preserve and their students provide them street power for protest marches. They are not known for condemning the specific groups involved in sectarian killings and terrorism, although they criticise sectarian violence in general terms, attributing this to unknown enemies of Islam and Pakistan.

There are a host of militant Islamic groups some of which openly preach sectarianism and use violence to promote their sectarian agendas while others

are actively involved in the Kashmir insurgency. Some of them developed links with the Taliban for military training and refuge.

The Islamic seminaries in Pakistan proliferated in the 1980s and the 1990s. Most of them do not teach violence to their students. But the narrow and limited religious education, often confined to a particular sect, creates a state of mind that make the students vulnerable to recruitment by sectarian and 'jihadi' groups. After the displacement of the Taliban from Kabul, a good number of Pakistanis, Afghans and nationals of some other countries associated with the Taliban or Al Qaeda took refuge in the tribal areas of Pakistan or moved to its mainland. Some of them also found their way to Karachi. It becomes difficult for the government to identify the extremists and terrorists from among so many groups and seminaries. Some of the militant groups may be known for their disposition but their activists cannot be easily tracked because the Islamic elements support and protect them even if they do not have formal links with each other.

The government needs to strengthen its security and intelligence gathering network to identify the groups and Islamic seminaries directly or indirectly involved in protecting and promoting militancy. If concrete evidence is available of involvement of any group or institution, it has to be confronted with the information and subsequently taken to task if it is not prepared to mend its ways. There is an urgent need to check the middle- and lower-level personnel of the security and intelligence network against their possible involvement with extremist elements. The government's partnership with the MMA should not be allowed to come in the way of implementing the declared policy on combating religious extremism and terrorism. Pakistan's credibility as a moderate Islamic state is at stake.

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