

Need for a national peace covenant

Pak - Development

By Muhammad Ali Siddiqi

AL QAEDA and Taliban are not the only source of violence in Pakistan: this point needs to be understood by all those elected, or not elected, in last month's general election. Today violence is eating into the vitals of Pakistan, and it would be wrong to consider the current terrorist wave as the only source of violence and misery for the people. Terrorism and violence both stand in the way of Pakistan's economic development and serve to suppress the Pakistani people's tremendous potential for enterprise in all walks of life - science, technology, industry, literature, music, drama, and the arts.

Violence must be distinguished from terrorism: both are a curse for the nation, but if there is a thing called non-terrorist violence then it has been with Pakistan for a long time, and this needs to be tackled as much as or perhaps more than the "conventional" terrorism coming from cold-blooded fanatics, religious as well as non-religious.

Terrorism in real earnest began in Pakistan in the wake of Islamabad's decision to join the US-led war on terror in 2001. It gained pace in the wake of the Lal Masjid crackdown in July last year. But mass violence had begun in Pakistan as far back as November 1968 with the death of a student in Rawalpindi and ended finally in March 1969 when Ayub quit and handed power over to Gen Yahia Khan. However, the masses had tasted the "fruits" of violence, they got addicted to it, and the idea that things can change or be made to change through violence, no matter what the price, started soaking into Pakistani minds, young or old, educated or uneducated, city folks or the yokel.

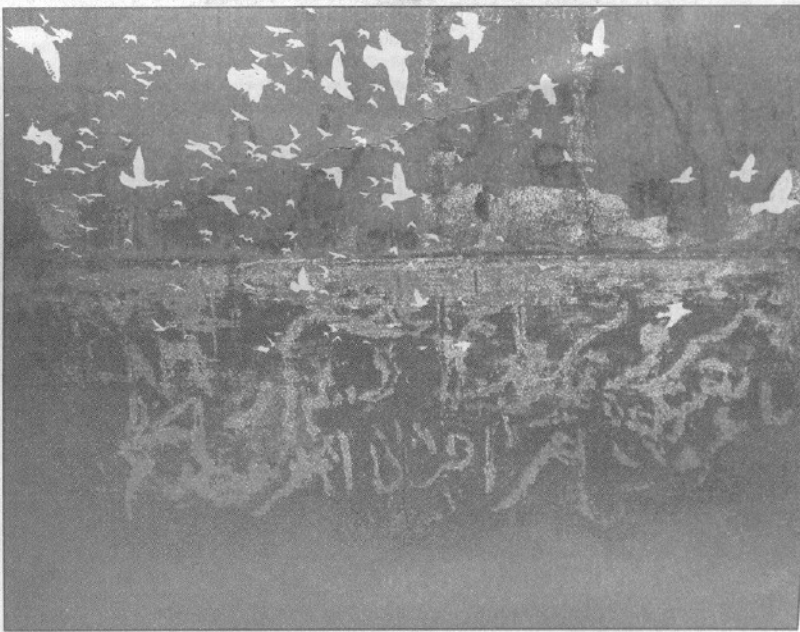
The same year, a Jewish fanatic burnt down the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, and there was mob violence in Pakistan, especially Karachi. It was not clear why the mob was attacking targets within Pakistan and why the police had to resort to tear gas and firing.

The full extent of mob fury, however, was seen in the PNA movement in 1977 following the general election in March. There is no doubt that the industrialists hurt by the PPP's nationalisation spree had financed the movement, and Bhutto made it clear that the United States, too, was involved in the

This marked the gradual erosion of the state's coercive apparatus and the concomitant strengthening of no less than dozen militias operating throughout the country. With Ziaul Haq gone, the religious parties countrywide and the MQM in Karachi became a state within a state and were using force to enforce "wheel jam" strikes as a principal mode of political protest. Sometimes, especially during the second PPP government, the MQM enforced strikes for three consecutive days, and once threatened an indefinite "wheel jam" strike. Those were Nasrullah Babar days, and the MQM was at the receiving end, with the government definitely involved in extra-judicial killings. The basic principle behind a strike - that a shopkeeper, a factory owner, a cart-pusher or a citizen - was free to follow or not follow the strike call was ignored, and all those who gave a call for a strike enforced it by violent means that included firing on shops and burning buses and other vehicles. The losses in terms of the property destroyed and industrial production suspended ran into billions of rupees each time there was a strike. The cumulative effect on the economy was in the shape of an absence of foreign investment.

A more pernicious phenomenon was violence on the campuses, with most political parties having fully armed student wings, which fought pitched battles in colleges, especially in Karachi. Elsewhere in the country the violence on campuses did not acquire the same level as in Karachi, but colleges and universities saw student bullies, backed by their political parties, terrorising the teachers and administrations and enforcing their own discipline to advance partisan causes.

Even madressahs, traditionally devoted to learning, shut Karachi down when religious



divines like Yusuf Ludhianvi and Mufti Shamzai were assassinated. It was not clear why they were

change or be made to change through violence, no matter what the price, started soaking into Pakistani minds, young or old, educated or uneducated, city folks or the yokel.

The same year, a Jewish fanatic burnt down the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, and there was mob violence in Pakistan, especially Karachi. It was not clear why the mob was attacking targets within Pakistan and why the police had to resort to tear gas and firing.

The full extent of mob fury, however, was seen in the PNA movement in 1977 following the general election in March. There is no doubt that the industrialists hurt by the PPP's nationalisation spree had financed the movement, and Bhutto made it clear that the United States, too, was involved in the agitation against him because of his nuclear ambitions. But all the money and the foreign involvement would not have led to the violence of that level if the leaders of the nine-party alliance - with such names as Asghar Khan, Nawabzada Nasrullah and Mufti Mahmood - had not motivated their cadres and the people into looting banks, attacking public and private property, and killing PPP supporters. The PNA leaders made the masses believe that their bloody agitation had succeeded in its aims, for the elected government was overthrown on July 5, 1977, Zia took over for "90 days" and then went on to rule for 11 years.

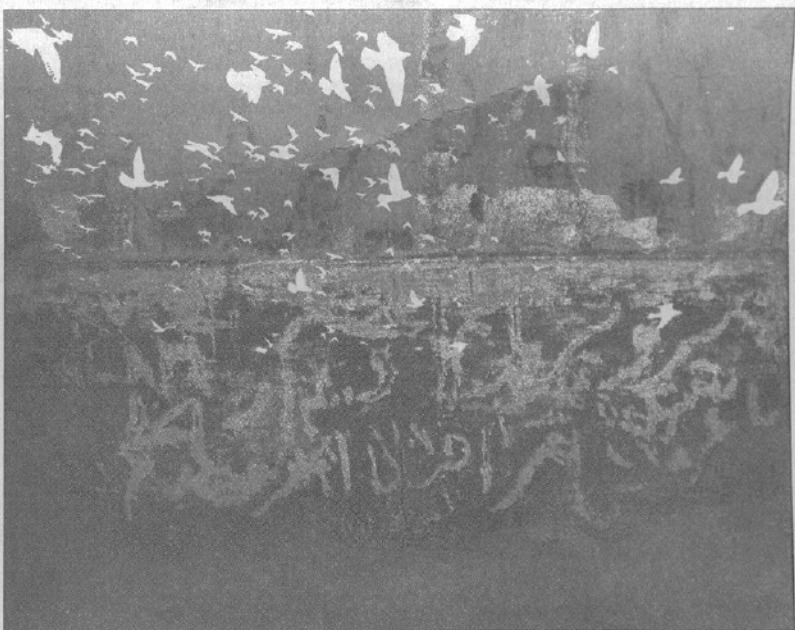
First two years of Zia's barbaric dictatorship were relatively quiet. But in November 1979 Saudi dissidents seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca, and a Rawalpindi mob burnt down the American Embassy - a totally unrelated target, because the Americans had nothing to do with it. In fact, the honeymoon between America and our religious parties was to begin a month later, when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan on Christmas eve 1979. Six years later, Karachi entered a period of violence that was to have disastrous consequences for the city and the country.

In April 1985, a girl, Bushra Zaidi, was crushed under the wheels of a mini-bus, and city-wide riots that initially focussed on the transporters later acquired an ethnic character. There were more transport-related cases of violence, including the one near Drigh Road railway station when a train hit a loaded mini-bus after the conductor removed the level-crossing's chain on his own.

Now violence became endemic, culminating in the Aligarh-Qasbah Colony massacre in December 1986, and suddenly the MQM came into its own, even though it had been formed in March 1984. Violence was now to acquire new dimensions. On the wider, national plane, the American support for the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan began to have domestic repercussions in a way that would turn the entire country into a Wild West. Even though the CIA's overt and covert aid was meant for the mujahideen fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan, in actual fact American arms and money found their way in large quantities into the hands of Pakistani religious parties, and suddenly they and their militias discovered their strength. Displaying weapons at public rallies became the norm, and no law enforcement agency had the courage or the inclination to take action, because Zia patronised them.

teachers and administrations and enforcing their own discipline to advance partisan causes.

Even madressahs, traditionally devoted to learning, shut Karachi down when religious



divines like Yusuf Ludhianvi and Mufti Shamzai were assassinated. It was not clear why they were punishing the 10 million residents of the city for the crime committed by an individual or syndicate. Besides the usual targets - buses and minibuses, cars, petrol pumps, foreign franchise restaurants, fire engines and even ambulances - they also attacked the offices of *Business Recorder*, killing two people. The American attack on Afghanistan, the Danish cartoons, and the bomb blasts in mosques and religious gatherings led to widespread death and destruction, with innocent lives lost in attacks on unrelated targets, as on the Punjab Assembly building in Lahore. It suffered a structural damage, while hundreds of vehicles were torched.

But Dec 27 last, the day Benazir was assassinated saw, saw an unprecedented level of country-wide mob violence, including the partial destruction of the railway system and the burning of factories. No precise and authentic figures of the economic loss suffered by the nation in two days of continued violence have been worked out yet, but the losses to the insurance companies alone run into billions of rupees.

Today violence stands between Pakistan and its socio-economic development. Foreign investment must flow in, but it cannot so long as violence continues. As I have said earlier, terrorism and suicide bombings are beyond the scope of this article. I have only focussed on violence stemming from strike calls by the political parties. With new winds of change blowing, it is time all political parties came to an understanding: they will pursue their policies and uphold the democratic right to dissent by any means other than strikes. All parties must swear by this oath, for let them note that a party in opposition today could be in government the next day. If it restored to violence when it was out of power, other parties will pay it back in the same coin when it finds itself in the corridors.

Pakistan's economic and technological development should not be the responsibility of the government of the day alone; it should be the responsibility of the opposition, too, since people vote for them to better their lot rather than to aggravate it. It is time some political party or leader took an initiative for prevailing upon all political parties, personalities and element to sign a Peace Covenant, whereby they would renounce any mode of action that directly or indirectly led to violence in the form of strikes and marches. Today violence stalks Pakistan. Ending this violence should be the prime duty of the Pakistani leadership, whether in government or in opposition.