**Pakistan First**

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August 23, 2023

What a strange coincidence! On the heels of a controversial onslaught of profanities against the state and its institutions, another enemy of Pakistan steps in the open with full galore; spilling innocent blood and spreading chaos all over.

The nexus between two seemingly unrelated entities, a benign political movement and a ruthless terrorist network, is hard to ignore. From the looks of it, both operate to achieve the same end.

It would be extremely naive to gloss over the bloodied cracks in our country and proclaim ours is a land flowing with milk and honey. Considering Pakistan is yet to come out of the shadows of gross miscalculations of the last seven decades, its colonialist approach towards the fringes and an overall reluctance to step into the twenty-first century, the fast-exacerbating crisis of belonging in the Pashtun region should not have come as a surprise to anyone. Only someone whose apathy has rendered him blind would willingly choose to make light of the sacrifices rendered by all classes and sections of the Pashtun society, especially after 9/11 changed the world around them in demonstrable and heart-breaking ways.

Dialogue, dialogue and some more dialogue are all that are needed to overcome the differences.

No tragedy–however massive–or no experience–however traumatic–can be rendered a lost cause if even a glimmer of determination to bring upon a better tomorrow persists. That we have a whole lot of snakes slithering in grass around us, ready to feed on our problems only to metaphorise them into one-eyed monsters has repeatedly been established. This obsession with burning down the house to roast the pig is where matters become complicated. The emergence of the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement against the widespread destruction of their homes and livelihoods, an unprecedented spate of killings and displacement and the daunting crisis of existence and identity should have been acknowledged as a step in the right direction. Understanding their grievances as a movement of the have-nots was necessary to restore their confidence in the motherland. But taking the fight to enemies and doing their ill-intended bidding because institutions of their state did not lend them a sympathetic ear should never have been pursued as a backup plan. For years, they have been accused of being funded and supported by foreign players. In certain ways, this fight to secure their own constitutionally guaranteed rights was diluted by heated calls to storm Islamabad. In a series of emphatic debates on August 18, leaders, drawing considerable attention from Indian media as “rockstar activists,” sent shockwaves across Pakistan with their open defiance of the writ of the state. No melodramatic analogies using the horrors of the 1971 War were necessary for Mr Manzoor Ahmed Pashteen to make his case. Violence related to the War on Terror and the concomitant politics of fear and discrimination should be addressed in the law-making houses, not on the streets amid calls for liberation.

We are living through times when as many as 19 households in South Waziristan are left helpless because innocent labourers drew the ire of blood-thirsty Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan by their pursuit of bread and butter for their loved ones. The Hydra of Lerna is on a mission to hit us where it hurts the most. Between attacks on law enforcement agencies and their installations, deliberate targeting of military convoys and numerous attempts to impede foreign investment in Pakistan, terrorists are trying every trick in the playbook just because we refuse to bow to their demands of absolute control.

At a time when militancy is back with a band, we cannot afford to fight on all fronts, especially with our own brothers. Raising the harrowing spectre of Bangladesh might have made some colourful headlines in the neighbourhood but would not go on to achieve much for the movement that had set out to reclaim the rights of the tribal people. These intemperate remarks by PTM leaders cannot be condoned and are manifestly counterproductive to the greater cause. Playing on the hands of others might earn someone five seconds in the spotlight but true activists know which boundaries are not to be crossed. Nelson Mandela and his lifetime of resistance against apartheid in South Africa are routinely quoted by political leaders. His golden words, “if you want to make peace, you don’t talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies” carry an ideal blueprint for both state as well as those who have had daggers drawn. It is time for genuine and meaningful engagement. Yes, healing the wounds of those who have lost all that they owned–means, men, dignity and honour–is absolutely necessary. But none of that can be achieved by throwing wild accusations or indulging in vile banter. Dialogue, dialogue and some more dialogue are all that are needed to overcome the differences and move together towards a prosperous Pakistan. Sab se Pehle Pakistan (Pakistan, first).

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