Pakistan's home-grown anti-terrorism strategy

To curtail criticism and increase credibility of the steps the government is taking to tackle the scourge of terrorism, Pakistan's military President General Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Jamali should state the following: "On behalf of the State and government of Pakistan I assure the people of Pakistan that the State of Pakistan will do all it takes to protect the life and property of its citizens. While the Constitutional rights of all citizens to freedom of speech and association will be protected, every violation of the law of the land will be dealt with firmly. Also as a responsible member of the international community Pakistan will not allow its territory or its citizens to be used by any internal or external forces to undermine the security of any other member country of the international community."

Such an articulation clearly states the objective and leaves nothing to the imagination. It does not adopt controversial terminology. Repeatedly the government and opinion-makers have used terms like 'religious extremists' and 'jihadis' to refer to groups that spread death, hate and fear through terrorism. This terminology has been used by the West. Washington and others have defined the problems in these terms which have contributed to the widening political gap between Washington and sections of the Muslim world. Within the Pakistani context this terminology is divisive. It has both negative religious and political connotations.

It is seen, even though incorrectly as an indirect attack on Islam. It invokes sensitivities that would be ignored at the cost of creating divisions within the society. Religious extremists means those who carry religion to an extreme. Indeed this is incorrect. Taking religion to an extreme certainly does not produce terrorism. Misinterpreting or distorting religion, however, can be dangerous. Another factor, the *madrassa* factor has been closely associated with the problem of terrorism. Admittedly the critique of the madrassa syllabus in terms of its inadequacy maybe valid but since the government chose to raise the problem less within the education context and more within the terrorism context, it has been criticised by millions who either directly or indirectly support or benefit from the madrassa system. It is the religious connotation that is questionable. Similarly using the religious term 'jihadi' for those who spread hate and death must be offensive for the overwhelming majority in Pakistan. More importantly it can alienate them from the steps that the government maybe taking to indeed restore security and law and order in Pakistan.

Politically, the use of this terminology which was born in Washington and the West contributes to the suspicion and conclusion of many Pakistanis that Pakistan's anti-ter-

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rorism policy is derivative from the policy of those whose terminology has been adopted. This terminology generates a political baggage that hinders implementation of Pakistan's own anti-terrorism policy. It generates cynicism and distrust. After all Pakistan and US have differing perceptions on key issues. For example extremism holds different meanings for the two. For the US, those who actively oppose its policies, combine politics with Islam and are critical of US's violation of international law sympathetic towards the

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Talibaan or the al-Qaeda, could classify as extremists. Although within the US itself the initial post-September 11 paranoia vis a vis politicised Muslims supporting Muslim causes maybe receding, the US paranoia vis-a-vis in the 'hub region' of Afghanistan, the surrounding states and now Iraq, where they believe 'extremists' and 'terrorists' will be harboured, is unlikely to recede. Irrespective of the justness of their cause and the intransigence of those who must adhere to international law and international agreements and come to the negotiating table to settle issues, the men of Hamas, Hizbullah and Hizbul Mujahideen or their supporters could be classified as terrorists to be targeted by Washington. US forces remain committed to directly and indirectly fighting against these groups. They are now based in Iraq, the Philippines, Georgia and Yemen to fight 'terrorists'. Politically, however, the government's vul-

nerability flows from other factors. For example the latest banning of sectarian parties and arrests of its members came only 48 hours after the US ambassador in Pakistan said enough was not being done by Pakistan to curb terrorism. Earlier too major army operations in Waziristan were conducted two days after the US Under Secretary Armitage complained that Pakistan's security agencies were not doing enough to nab al-Qaeda members. The Waziristan operation conducted in the presence of 'embedded journalists' met with major criticism at home. The major thrust of all political criticism of Pakistan's anti-terrorism policy is that it was is not home-grown, that it is scripted in Washington. Criticism on this count is more than the government merits. However, the onus to change this perceptional reality is on the government. It must adopt a more comprehensive and pro-active than a reactive anti-terrorism policy.

There are administrative and political demands to successfully implement such a policy. An administrative infrastructure for effective policing, intelligence-gathering and punishment awarding system is required. Additionally constant and clear communication by the State actors of the 'what' and 'why' of the specific actions that the government takes to control terrorism, to stop the spread of violence and death, is essential. Transparency of intent and action is a first step towards confidence-building.

On the political front a consensus among national political parties and opinion-making electronic and print media is required which would turn combating terrorism a national priority. The ongoing government-Opposition confrontation, however, rules this out. Instead the Opposition accuses the government of supporting ethnic groups involved in terrorism in the and rounding up religious parties to please the United States. Undoubtedly against a clearly articulated and credible terrorism policy committed to protecting the life and property of its citizens there can be no popular opposition. Over the last year bomb blasts in public places, administration offices and buses, attacks on mosques, *imambarghas* and churches and systematically targeted killings of doctors in Karachi in which dozens of Pakistanis and a few foreigners have been killed. Citizens would naturally support a State that undertakes to fulfill one of its primary responsibilities. Only the objective, articulation and conduct of such a policy has to flow from domestic realities and compulsions. Such a policy would inevitably fulfill Pakistan's international legal obligations too; on anti-terrorism there is a general convergence between international compulsions and domestic compulsions.