[**Capitulation redux**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1655669/capitulation-redux)

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A POPULAR quip from nearly 50 years ago sprang to mind while contemplating the so far secret deal between the purported authorities in Islamabad and the purportedly proscribed Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP). It went something like this: “Haar gaye tau shaheed, jeet gaye tau ghazi, surrender kar diya tau Niazi.”

It could loosely be translated as: martyrs if we lose, conquerors if we win, but it takes a Niazi to surrender. The context, of course, was Gen A.A.K. Niazi’s formal surrender in Dhaka to his Indian counterpart, Gen Jagjit Singh Aurora, in December 1971.

It was generally greeted with dismay in what was then still known as West Pakistan largely because dispatches in the mainstream media about what was taking place in the eastern wing bore little relation to reality.

Today’s context is very different, and the ‘Niazi’ appellation is seldom attached to the prime minister’s name. Equally, perhaps there’s no obvious parallel between the surrenders of 1971 and 2021. But surely the difference itself offers some kind of guide to the trajectory of Pakistan’s journey in the intervening half-century.

It looks like history is being repeated as farce.

There’s a vast gulf between a geopolitical surrender and kowtowing to a home-grown obscurantist entity. And there’s the possibility that the government’s deal with the TLP isn’t exactly an abject surrender. Perhaps it’s a tentative truce. The details have not been publicly shared. But the trend is hardly a secret, and any official ‘compromise’ with such entities involves a lot more give than take.

It has been claimed on behalf of the TLP that breaking off relations with France (or the European Union) was never one of its goals. That seems disingenuous, given that Imran Khan was persuaded earlier this year to put the matter before the National Assembly. Fortunately, it wasn’t pursued.

The trigger was allegedly blasphemous caricatures in a French publication, over which the government in Paris has no control. Ignoring offensive cartoons may be the most sensible response, given that an overreaction mainly serves to publicise the source of the offence. But the required common sense is invariably conspicuous by its absence, and not just in this particular context.

The current polity is often described as a hybrid regime, which isn’t inaccurate but it is hardly a very recent phenomenon. The hybridity has effectively been a feature since a mid-air explosion ended the Zia era, with subsequent civilian regimes that defied the limits of their permitted power being slapped down in no uncertain terms.

Imran Khan and his PTI were presumably never under too many illusions on that score — even though the recent tussle over the leadership of the ISI hints at a momentary lapse of cognisance. But the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf has hardly been more adept than its predecessors in tackling the wayward offspring of Ziaul Haq’s dalliance with fundamentalism. Perhaps that’s partly because Zia’s legacy did not wither away with his demise, and several of the jihadist entities that emerged in the 1990s and thereafter enjoyed the imprimatur of the powers that be, with or without the consent of the civilian establishment.

It could certainly be argued that there was more nurture than nature involved in the emergence of a veritable alphabet soup of groups that threatened Pakistan as well as its neighbours. Pushing them across the borders northwest or east has long ceased to be a viable option.

Proscribing such groups evidently makes little difference, and they tend to be handled with kid gloves compared with the harsh repression reserved for non-violent defenders of human rights such as the Pashtun Tahaffuz Move­ment, whose legitimate cause is backed by popular support.

There would be little point in denying that the likes of TLP also enjoy a degree of popular backing, but the reluctance to resist them has more to do with their ideology than their level of support. It’s tricky to resist an ideological current once you have bought into it, and relied upon it to legitimise your half-baked power. Just last month, the prime minister announced the formation of the Rehmatul-lil-Aalameen Authority. Many would ask, if that is the vision for ‘Naya Pakistan’, how can the TLP not be a part of it?

Perhaps there’s a touch of irony in the fact that a distant ancestor of the prime minister, Haibat Khan Niazi, was a key noble in the administration of Sher Shah Suri, the ruler credited with modernising the Grand Trunk Road that the TLP was blocking until its secret deal with Islamabad. Avoiding further violence is obviously a plus. But the terms of the surrender, if and when they are revealed, may prove to be rather less gratifying.

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