**Checkmate**

BY U M A I R J A V E D 2021-11-01

BY the time this column goes to print, the TLP will either still be wreaking havoc on N-5 or some settlement would`ve been struck. Either way, considerable damage to life, property, and the mental peace of residents of at least three districts in Punjab is already done.

TLP activists coming out on the streets is, by now, a familiar phenomenon. There have been at least three previous instances of the same, with each exacting a heavy toll. And yet authorities appear no closer to finding a way to prevent it.

There are several reasons as to why the state remains handicapped; most of these reasons, however, are grounded in the speciñc nature of the T LP movement and the politics that surrounds it. It is this configuration that makes it a particularly difficult political question to resolve.

Let`s start with the first act. The state recognises the right to peaceful protest. This right is selectively extended, but it exists and that allows TLP cadres to come out on the streets in the first instance. Because `more acceptable` political parties, such as the one currently in government, have also used and taken advantage of this right, banning all such activity is not an option. Even if it were selectively allowed, the exceptions provide both a legal and a moral case for the first act of mobilisation.

Once on the street, the mobilisation takes on a life of its own. It makes outrageous demands, charts its own route, blockades main roads to generate attention and displays its strength through the congregation and movement of numbers. It becomes a power show. Authorities face two options allow it to continue in the hope that it will peter out; or try to regulate its mobility through force.

The first may have been a workable strategy a decade ago, when Barelvi activists and acolytes were getting a feel for street power, but it no longer has any dampening effect. People once out, rarely go back, and strength in numbers attracts even more.

The second strategy -use of force -has its own constraints. Policing personnel are underresourced and untrained in modern riot controltechniques.The use ofbatons and teargas appear to be the only tools in their arsenal, but ones that often lead to an escalating cycle of violence. The use of indiscriminate force (lethal or non-lethal) even in retaliation is obviously not an option both from a legal perspective on paper the state has to abide by its own norms and laws and from a political one: victimisation gives further fuel to a movement that sees itself as victims of global and local conspiracies anyway.

Protests can`t be banned, and even if they are, the bans will be flouted. Activists clearly don`t tire of coming on the streets and staying there. The backing of a vast network of mosques and local Barelvi organisations can`t be switched off like atap. The capacity for tactical riot control doesn`t exist, and the use of indiscriminate force has both moral and legal implications and should be shunned. All that leaves authorities with is partial use of force and negotiations from a position of weakness.

On the face of it, these are hard constraints and ones that limit the extent of what authorities can do. However, even if there were some magical alternative solution, the persistence of these constraints is tied to deeper political and social realities that make them even more permanent.

Consider this the state has no problem enforcing curfews in borderland and peripheral geographies. Ask the people of the newly merged districts and Balochistan. It also has no issues using lethal coercion in the name of policing in the same territories. It calls protesting doctors, nurses, teachers,and citizens asking for respite from terrorism, blackmailers and brings out water cannons and tear gas on a whim.

What makes the T LP different is both its geography and its ideology. It is a movement that is more rooted in urban and peri-urban Punjab than any previous religio-political one. It has managed to weld together support from large swathes of the Punjabi lumpenclass with sections of the trader/ merchant petty bourgeoisie through an embedded religious leadership that commands a large mosque network. In other words, it is tied to the same supposed heartland that provides the greatest numbers and legitimacy to the state. Turning on it is not an option like it is in areas far removed from the state`s largesse and imagination.

Ideologically, the movement`s rhetoric places a significant straitjacket on the state itself. It speaks for love of the Prophet (PBUH). Its followers call themselves ashig-i-rasool It seeks to defend the honour of the Prophet and the finality of prophethood from international conspirators and their local compradors. How can a state ostensibly created in the name of religion oppose any of this? How can a federal government that has spent the better part of the last few years trying to establish its own religious credentials disallow others from expressing theirs? How can a provincial administration that is creating more space for religious authorities in everything from nikah documents to curriculum oversight and management stop any section of the religious elite from staking their claim? The fact of the matter is that the state and its mainstream political class has no coherent ideologicalresponse tothe TLPthatdoesnotoperateonthe latter`s turf. Years of using the same rhetoric, paying fealty to the same goals, and exploiting the same anti-minority fault lines will produce an outcome where a movement can stand up and assert itselfas the true representative ofthis cause.m The writer teaches politics and sociology at Lums.

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