**Price of capitulation?**

Farhan Bokhari

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As Prime Minister Imran Khan resets the course for a difficult run-up to the next general elections, his government’s recent capitulation to pressure from the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) raises compelling questions over the future.

The pitched battle between the Punjab police and diehard TLP supporters on GT Road concluded with the worst retreat by any ruling structure in recent memory. The outcome from this sorry fiasco can only be one – a further erosion of the already weak authority of the state.

In the process, the credibility of Pakistan’s already weak policing system has been thrown further in tatters. After TLP activists clashed with the Punjab police and left behind severely injured uniformed personnel – some of whom succumbed to their injuries – questions must be asked over the ability of Pakistan’s internal security mechanism to deal with future crises of a similar or greater magnitude. An increasingly demoralised police force can just not be considered the best guarantor for internal security in the face of future challenges involving public unrest.

The latest capitulation has coincided with a controversial move to open peace talks with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) – a group which is responsible for the deaths of thousands of innocent Pakistanis. Exactly how Khan or other key leaders will simply ignore the TTP’s past remains unclear.

What is however clear is that the controversy generated in the wake of the rapprochement with the TLP and the peace talks with the TTP has caused a deeper dent in the state’s credibility. Fundamentally, the reliability of the state is set to land increasingly in disarray as it widens its engagement with militant factions.

The prime minister has indeed embarked on a dangerous course for the future of Pakistan, as he signals the reality of a weakened state practically exposed on its half-knees and seeking peace with militant factions. The initiative has become additionally controversial as it has been undertaken without the backing of a wider set of political and societal stakeholders. Without a prior debate in parliament, even in-camera, the ‘go it alone’ character of this process leaves behind some dangerous gaps.

The initiative has become further complicated as it has been saddled with questions on two fundamental fronts.

First, the latest appeasement has followed on from the uncertainty released under the most mediocre government in the Punjab province, Pakistan’s most populous province and home to almost 60 percent of the country’s population. It is here that the blood-ridden showdown between the TLP and the provincial government took place recently.

In the three years and a bit preceding this clash, the failure of Chief Minister Usman Buzdar’s administration to take charge of a variety of functions including internal security, has triggered widespread scepticism over the future. A telling joke in Lahore – that the provincial inspector general’s tenure comes with fewer assurances than that of a police constable – says much about the state of affairs with the police. The moral of this story is firmly anchored on the frequent replacement of inspectors general of the Punjab police – altogether there have been six IGs appointed just over the past three years.

Second, the failure to take charge of internal security has also further complicated the future prospects for the economy. At a time when Pakistan’s mainstream population is widely suffering from the effects of crippling inflation surrounding the prices of daily-use food items, the official chorus of a coming upturn is indeed widely taken with a pinch of salt. While some of Pakistan’s top leaders are keen to proclaim prosperity around the corner on the back of matters like rising exports, the mood on the streets remains far from jubilant.

Going forward, Khan’s ability to take charge of Pakistan’s future remains doubtful. His failure to appreciate the writing on the wall on a range of issues – from politics to security and the economy – poses growing challenges to the future of Pakistan. The decision to seek a rapprochement with militants not only marks a deviation from the best way forward for the future of Pakistan, but also spells disaster for resolving a key dilemma – the challenge of restoring the credibility of an increasingly weak Pakistani state.

The writer is an Islamabad-based journalist who writes on political and economic affairs.

Email: farhanbokhari@gmail.com