**State of surrender**

BY Z A H I D H U S S A I N 2021-10-27

IT has not happened for the first time that the state has surrendered to a group it had declared terrorist. But the way the government capitulated yet again to the banned Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan is despicable. A day af ter the TLP threatened to storm the capital and two policemen were killed in Lahore, the interior minister announced that the government had accepted all their demands.

He was all praise for the leaders of the outlawed outfit that has held the country hostage to its retrogressive, violent ideology. All those involved in the rioting and killing of the law enforcers have been released and it has also been decided to unfreeze the group`s bank accounts.

It`s not clear what other demands the government has conceded to. The interior minister also appeared confused over the fact that his government had banned the TLP earlier this year and had declared it a terrorist group. He now wants the cabinet to review the decision. The minister tries to rationalise the surrender in the face of violence saying that `...it is not the job of the state to use the stick`.

It couldn`t get more shameful than this, with the government surrendering its right to use force to maintain law and order and protect the lives of citizens. These pronouncements by the interior minister raise questions about the state`s resolve to fight all manner of violent extremism and terrorism. In fact, the government has shamelessly accepted the use of violence by a proscribed organisation in pursuance of the latter`s illegal demands.

Now the government has backed down on its own notification that declared the TLP a terrorist group.

The federal government had stated at the time that it had `reasonable grounds to believe that Tehreeki-Labbaik Pakistan is engaged in terrorism, [has] acted in a manner prejudicial to the peace and security of the country....` Ironically, the same outfit has now been declared kosher af ter it unleashed terror last week and threatened to storm the capital.

The shock and dismay expressed by the Punjab Police over the administration`s capitulation to the militants has not come as a surprise. Nothing could be more demoralising for the law-enforcement agency which has suffered loss of lives while dealing with the violent zealots than the government`sdecision to release those held responsible for the death of police officials. The agreement with the TLP has certainly `pushed the police against the wall`. As one senior Punjab Police officer has been quoted by the media, `the government has to stand with either the law enforcers or the T LP`.

While bringing the administration to its knees the group has not yet agreed to call of f its agitation.

Emboldened by the government`s spinelessness, TLP leaders seem to have upped their demands.

They have given a deadline to the government to fulfil its commitments including severing diplomatic relations with France. The interior minister has promised to bring the issue to parliament without realising the diplomatic ramifications of any such move.

Previously, parliament rejected a resolution on the issue; reopening of the debate on a highly sensitive matter could be very damaging. The entire episode has also exposed the growing bigotry championed by the prime minister.

Although the TLP has been engaging in violent protestson various faith-basedissues sinceitsinception a few years ago, the latest round of agitations started last year when the group took up the matter of blasphemous images and the French president`s controversial remarks. It called for breaking diplomatic ties with France and besieged the capital.

The zealots under the leadership of cleric Khadim Hussain Rizvi, the founder of the TLP, went back triumphantly after the government accepted the demand without understanding the diplomatic f allout of such an agreement. The government`s own stance on the issue was no less controversial.

Whipping up religious sentiments, Prime Minister Imran Khan in his speeches, while differing with the TLP on its agitational methods, endorsed the group`s position on the issue. Such statements coming from the country`s highest political office are disconcerting.

Of course, it was not the first time the state surrendered. But the November 2020 agreement was certainly the most shameful. The agreement led the EU to censure Pakistan. It further tarnished Pakistan`s international image regarding religious extremism. The government`s appeasement of theextremist group reinforced scepticism of Imran Khan`s campaign against `Islamophobia`.

Unsurprisingly, the militants were back on the street earlier this year in pursuance of the group`s demand for the expulsion of the French envoy. The government`s policy of appeasement came back to haunt it. A panicked administration outlawed the group and detained many of its leaders under the anti-terrorism laws. But soon the government started backing down, promising to review the decision, thus creating a dangerous ambiguity regarding the TLP`s status.

What has happened now is the culmination of a weak-kneed approach in dealing with violent extremism over the last few years. The government`s policy of appeasement has hugely empowered the group which represents rising Barelvi militancy in the country. Now it has turned into a formidable religiously inspired political force threatening to tear apart the social fabric of this country.

Equally worrying are the Imran Khan government`s own right-wing policies that are fuelling bigotry. There seems to be little difference between the TLP`s religious extremism and the PTI government`s policy of encouraging religiosity. It is certainly cause for serious concern. Not surprisingly, the country f aces a more violent form of zealotry.

It`s not just about dealing with the TLP but also the government`s efforts to make peace with other terrorist outfits like the outlawed TTP which has been responsible for the killing of thousands of Pakistanis. The government has of fered amnesty to the militants at a time when the TTP has intensified terrorist attacks in the former tribal regions. These attacks have claimed the lives of a number of Pakistani soldiers in the past few months.

The PTI government`s policy of appeasement has increased the terrorist threat to the country.

Surrendering to terrorist groups will have very serious consequences for the country`s security and stability. The w/iteris the author of No-Win War The Paradox of US-Pakistan Relations in Afghanistan`s Shadow.

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