**The fault was in our policies**

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The terrible terrorist attack in Bajaur shows that, despite having sacrificed more than 70,000 lives and suffering financial losses worth over $100 billion, we have been unable to stamp out the menace of terrorism completely.

The Bajaur attack that ripped through a workers’ convention of Jamiat Ulema Islam this past Sunday has left many lives shattered. Around 50 people were killed in the attack that has alarmed not just the people of Bajaur but also in the rest of the country.

This is not the first time Bajaur has been thrown into death and destruction. Over the past two decades, the area has witnessed a number of terrorist attacks. In addition to that, American drone attacks during the ‘war on terror’ also wreaked havoc with the lives of people targeting many innocent people, including women and children and then military operations in the region also added to the woes of the locals.

There are speculations that the Sunday attack might have been carried out by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). It is believed that the militant outfit has not only targeted the JUI-F in several parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa but has also tried to target the workers of the Jamaat-e-Islami during a recent rally in Balochistan.

Although both the Salafi and Deobandi schools of thought fought together against the Russians during the Afghan Jihad, the Salafis now seem to be following a different path. They are strongly opposed to the Afghan Taliban who are largely Deobandi. The ISKP is also believed to be opposed to all those Pakistani groups and religious parties that are seen as sympathetic to the Afghan Taliban or support the regime in Kabul. This is one of the factors prompting the ISKP to target the JUI-F which is considered pro-Afghan Taliban. The condemnation of the attack in Bajaur by the TTP, the Afghan Taliban and Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan clearly indicates that these militants are deeply divided along sectarian lines, which could be catastrophic for both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

It seems that Pakistan is turning into a battleground between the Afghan Taliban and ISIS. The ISKP had previously targeted individual clerics in parts of Pakistan, especially KP and Balochistan, but this audacious attack in Bajaur indicates that they are ready to wreak more havoc with the lives of Pakistanis. Given the fact that six top TTP commanders in the past, including Shahid Ullah Shahid, joined Daesh ranks, and the fact that Pakistan is host to quite a few sectarian militants, this should be a source of great concern for us.

The numerical strength of resistance groups would matter a lot in the past but suicide bombing assured terrorist outfits that even if they didn’t enjoy the support of the majority, they could still be effective. The Afghan Taliban used suicide bombing against the governments of Karzai and Ghani and now Daesh is using the same against the Afghan Taliban. Salafis constitute a tiny minority in Afghanistan but despite this they have mounted large-scale terrorist attacks. Some of the most brutal attacks during the last two decades were also carried out by this outfit in Afghanistan. Now, the pernicious tentacles of this group also seem to be engulfing parts of Pakistan. This could spell a disaster for a country that has already lost tens of thousands of people in the ‘war on terror’.

But the attack in Bajaur should also serve as a reminder that in matters of extremist groups, one cannot have the luxury of declaring some good and others bad. We need to understand that once we let violence decide a certain matter then it always decides the fate of the nation.

Our disastrous policy in Afghanistan in 1979 seems to be boomeranging on us. Nationalist leaders had warned us then that Pakistan could not be at peace if Afghanistan were thrown into the flames of war and that the monster we were creating would one day haunt us but we chose to turn a blind eye to all this, throwing blanket support behind the ‘jihad’ that was initiated for the protection of American interests in the region. The US and its Western allies used Pakistan as a dispensable country, dumping Islamabad after their interests

were served. The country fought the war of the West and in return was gifted with a Kalashnikov culture, drug culture and the curse of extremism besides also playing host to Afghan refugees.

Despite the sacrifices, we were given a lukewarm response by the Afghan fighters during the decade of the 1990s when they turned down our plea to get united. The mujahideen plunged Kabul into death and destruction, sowing the seeds of chaos that culminated into the triumph of the Afghan Taliban. Instead of learning from past experiences, Islamabad patronized them. Owing to this policy, even today we are vulnerable to sectarian fault lines in places like Gilgit-Baltistan and the Kurram tribal district.

What is done cannot be undone but policymakers in Islamabad should now at least realize that the policy of supporting violent capture of power will not work in modern times. Our politicians and religious leaders should give up this hypocrisy of supporting democracy in Pakistan and theocracy in Afghanistan. They want Pakistani women to get education, run businesses and participate in politics but wish to see Afghan women out of education institutions, places of employment and seats of power. We want to see democratic norms and culture flourish in Pakistan. We don’t want to tolerate any delay in the holding of polls but wish to see a totalitarian setup in Kabul.

Every party here should reflect upon the support they extended to the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan cannot witness any stability until there is a democratic setup in the war-torn country. The presence of a theocratic government in Kabul will encourage extremist groups of Pakistan, prompting them to capture power the way the Afghan Taliban did.

Therefore, it is important that we convince the Afghan Taliban that they cannot maintain their hegemony on the basis of force. If they do so, the ISKP and other groups will also try to seek the same hegemony through the force of the gun, and the country will not see peace and stability not only for years but decades. Pakistani scholars, politicians and policymakers should make efforts to persuade the Afghan Taliban to adopt democratic ways. If the JI, JUI-F and other political parties can contest elections and for them if democratic practices are not un-Islamic then why should they be for the Afghan Taliban.

Pakistan has recently launched a number of initiatives to stabilize the economy and enhance regional connectivity. No such initiative can be successful, however, unless complete peace is achieved in Afghanistan because the landlocked country is a gateway to not only Central Asia but beyond as well. The Afghan Taliban need to realize that in today’s world, any government gets its legitimacy from free and fair elections. No matter how many threats the Kabul regime hurls at the international community, nothing will work unless the Taliban attain a modicum of legitimacy that can only come through democratic means.

Pakistan must join the international community in pressuring the Kabul regime into abiding by international norms and universally accepted human rights. Islamabad’s policy shift is a key to peace in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

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