**Hostage to extremism**

BY Z A H I D H U S S A I N 2021-04-14

IT is not for the first time that a religiously motivated group has disrupted civic life but what happened this week is extremely serious. The state seemed to have disappeared as the followers of a radical cleric blocked highways and train tracks connecting the country`s main cities. Violent mobs held sway in many parts of the country. Most disturbing are the videos circulating on social media of some security personnel approvingly responding to the crowd.

It all started with the protest against the detention of Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan chief Saad Hussain Rizvi, a day after he threatened to storm Islamabad in pursuance of his group`s demand for the expulsion of the French ambassador over blasphemous images and the French president`s controversial remarks. The young cleric who took over the group`s command after his father`s death wanted the government to implement the agreement the TLP claimed the ruling set-up had reached with it late last year.

The shameful surrender has come back to haunt the government. It had apparently conceded to all the demands presented by the group during a protest march in Islamabad last November. The demands included parliamentary approval for severing diplomatic ties with France within three months. Such a move could have been disastrous.

How can the government allow a group to dictate to it on a sensitive foreign policy matter? That sense of victory gave further stridency to the TLP. Not surprisingly, the protesters led by Khadim Hussain Rizvi, the founder of the group, had gone home triumphant. A few days later, the cleric died reportedly of Covid-19. Hundreds of thousandsof peopleattendedhisfuneralinLahore.

Saad Hussain Rizvi seems to be trying to emulate his father`s vitriolic oratory. The latest call for a long march to Islamabad was seen as an attempt by the young cleric to continue his father`s legacy of extremism. His speeches being live-streamed on social media are no less provocative. It is the same kind of toxic narrative in the name of f aith that has been witnessed all along. Where is the law when itcomes to those who spew such vitriol and who hold the nation hostage? It was the sit-in in Islamabad in 2017 that announced the arrival of the TLP on the scene as a major sectarian force representing Barelvi militancy. The group`s protest centred on a clause in the Election Act relating to the finality of prophethood.

Religious sentiments were whipped up and the matter soon turned into a political controversy. The stand-off continued for weeks before the security agencies intervened to broker the deal. The civili an government was made to sign on the dotted line and concede to the demands of the group.

Apparently, a senior intelligence of ficer was also a signatory to the deal along with the then interior minister. As I wrote in this space at the time: `It is hard to recall another instance of an intelligence official involved in brokering a deal between the government and extremists challenging the writ of the state.` The footage that was telecast of the Punjab Rangers chief distributing cash to the protesters was simply appalling.

I had also mentioned the fact that the protesters were being rewarded for targeting the civilian law enforcers and vandalising public property. `The authority of the state has seldom been so compromised. It was not just appeasement but abject submission to the lawbreakers and the non-state actors that has undermined the legitimacy of the civil administration.

It is no surprise that this episode ended up empowering the extremists. The TLP emerged as a major political force in the 2018 election. The group might not have won a National Assembly seat, but it was the third largest group in terms of votes in Punjab.

It was the same policy of appeasement that led the PTI government to concede to the TLP`s demands in November 2020. Indeed, the deal ended the protest but by giving in to the irrational demands of the religious group the government and the state have further weakened their own authority. The administration, it is clear, has notlearned any lessons from its mistakes or the cost of delayed action.

While the agreement empowered the radical group, the government only managed to postpone the crisis. What has been happening now was inevitable. The way the administration has collapsed in the face of mob violence is alarming to say the least, and underscores how we are failing to deal with rising religious extremism.

How can a particular group become so emboldened as to paralyse the entire country? Once again, the TLP has succeeded in bringing the administration to its knees. The inaction of successive governments and the policy of appeasement has created a veritable monster.

The PTI government`s overdose of religiosity has given impunity to extremist religious groups. Now the government faces a more violent form of zealotry. The spectacle of the mob beating police officers and making them hostage has exposed the f alse claims of the rule of law.

In Punjab, which has been the centre of the violence, a few thousand zealots were able to paralyse the whole administration. The violence could have easily been stopped with timely action against the rioters. Instead, the inaction has further emboldened the rampaging mob. What message was being sent to all those who have suffered the consequences of the blockade and violence? The latest episode is a manifestation of a serious problem relate d to the rise of a more r adic al Barelvi sectarian movement that publicly espouses violence in the name of a narrow view of religion. But it is the government`s responsibility to uphold the rule of law.

The challenge of extremism overall must also be looked at as a significant concern. Religion and its nexus with politics have fuelled bigotry. A joint effort is needed by all stakeholders to deal with this rising menace.  The writer is an author and journalist.

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