

# Beyond the 'original sin'

By Ayesha Siddiqua

Militancy

THE Nizam-i-Adl Regulation 2009 has been promulgated by the NWFP government after being approved by the president at the recommendation of the National Assembly — all in the name of national security.

Many will consider this a forceful response to the Obama administration which seems to have its own plans to fight the war on terror and influence Islamabad's behaviour.

This raises the fundamental question of whether our policymakers actually realise what path they are treading. Or as Cyril Almeida stated in his excellent article on these pages last Friday, that Pakistan is a dangerous place because it doesn't know what to do about militancy.

Why is it important to give the US a bloody nose? Because, according to some Pakistani commentators, America is solely responsible for the bloodshed in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Had it not been for 9/11, violence of the scale in Pakistan today might not have occurred. Driven by their Pakhtun nationalism, many individuals quickly formed militant gangs to fight the invading force. As demonstrated in Afghanistan and other parts of the world, foreign invaders contribute to the acceleration of chaos in a major way. Had Washington listened to Mullah Omar and allowed him to gently deal with Osama bin Laden, there wouldn't have been this war on terror.

In fact, America's 'original sin' goes back to the 1980s when driven by its passion to give the Soviets a bloody nose in Afghanistan, the CIA partnered the ISI to create jihad and jihadis. It was the most cost-effective way of fighting the war. One cannot forget the historical photograph of American President Ronald Reagan sitting with numerous Afghan warlords in the Oval Office.

But then towards the end of the 1980s both the Soviets and Americans disappeared from the scene which was then taken over by our own armed forces. From then onwards, the jihad project was kept alive for other objectives including the fulfillment of the famous plan of 'strategic defiance' of the US envisioned by local military minds such as Generals Mirza Aslam Beg and Hameed Gul. The idea was to build an additional infantry force that would provide Pakistan 'strategic

depth' in terms of Afghan manpower in case the country was ever attacked. A part of this force would be deployed at other fronts as well. At times, these jihadis were even fed through the slaughter of Pakistan's Shia community whose members are being targeted since the 1980s.

The plan worked fine until 9/11 after which the US attack on Afghanistan opened a Pandora's Box. The ideologically motivated elements that otherwise might have taken a bit longer to usurp Pakistani society's breathing space, came to the surface. This was a plan gone awry because of uncontrolled exogenous factors. Until the American attack the militant forces had been slowly poisoning society in Pakistan. For instance, the killing of Shias taking place since the 1980s was not due to Pakhtun nationalism but the ideology of Ibn Taimiyah. And these forces were further strengthened once the Taliban were assisted in controlling Afghanistan, a regime that was recognised only by three states — Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

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Now, a combination of historical factors makes it difficult to turn the clock back. First, the war in Afghanistan continues to intensify. This does not mean that American withdrawal will change things dramatically. In fact, if the US were to leave as it left Vietnam many years ago, violence would increase, especially in the short- to medium-term.

Second, a reversal of the social transformation, which is happening rapidly in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, requires major socioeconomic development efforts. This might not happen due to the current global economic conditions.

Third, the intelligentsia is divided between the liberal and the conservative. While the latter continue to focus on America's wrongdoings without taking into account the evolution of our own society and its responsibility in this the former bury their faces in the sand and imagine that all of this

will blow over. There is hardly any willingness to question and challenge the intellectual space which the extremists have taken over. The liberals are not willing to question the religious arguments presented by the other side.

In today's Pakistan, the common man listens to the religious right and the militants because there is no one out there willing to challenge the interpretation presented by the religious and political right. Since we do not investigate issues pertaining to religion, there is no point looking at that route. I am assuming this is what Cyril Almeida also meant when he talked about our inability to think of what is happening to us. If things continue this way, it won't be too far when our liberal elite will have to escape to the rest of the world, just like the Afghan elite did during the 1990s.

Finally, we have a state that does not have any clue about where it wants to be in this century. People have classifications for weak states such as banana republic, a term many despise. Probably, the right term for

Pakistan is the 'jalebi republic', circles within circles and no clarity about the future. We have a political elite which never learns from its past mistakes and is happy being protected by an outside force instead of building institutions at home; a security establishment which like an angry

young man can go to any lengths to respond to a challenge to its ego; an establishment that would like to challenge the US without proper planning as to what it would do once external sources of funding, which it heavily depends on, dry up.

This is not to argue that Pakistan cannot survive without foreign aid. The poor are far more resilient than the ruling elite who, in any case, do not allow foreign aid to effectively find its way to the grass roots. So, one wonders what will this elite do once the foreign money disappears?

Last but not least, one must also mention a liberal political party that enters into deals with the Taliban. Given these conditions, the liberal elite might be better off packing their bags. ■

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