**Return of terror**

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For all the efforts made over the past years, things seem to have returned to a previous situation. This conflict included a war against terror fought by Pakistan during which many lives were sacrificed. There was also the National Action Plan which was worked out between all political parties and the military after the 2014 APS horrendous attack.

Since August last year, there has been a distinct increase in terrorist incidents notably in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the former tribal belt. This coincides with the establishment of a Taliban government in Afghanistan, with all its assaults on the rights of women in particular. And recently the TTP announced it was ending the ceasefire with the government although such a ceasefire never really existed in practice. The new moves, however, do suggest that terrorism is back in full force and is already causing immense damage, both to law and order and to political development.

The latest of these outrages has been the seize of a CTD police station in Bannu, where personnel were held hostage for nearly 24 hours or more as ‘negotiations’ continued. Since August last year, according to reports in the media, there have been countless terrorist attacks at the very least in KP and the former Fata areas which now form a part of that province – with police and law-enforcement personnel as well as civilians having lost their lives. While it is difficult to establish the full facts, the reality is that the people of the former Fata areas and of various parts of KP now live once again under a cloud of fear.

We saw protests staged in Swat and other areas over the threat to girls' education and other human rights abuses in that area, in many ways mirroring what is happening in Afghanistan. Swat has been essentially free of militant actions since 2009 when the military defeated the militants after a long and vicious battle that led to a further culture of brutality and violence in that area. For now, the people in Swat and other places face a much more direct threat and it is quite obvious from the latest attacks including the one in Lakki Marwat on Sunday, which killed four policemen and injured an equal number of others, that terrorist violence is once again on the rise.

There are allegations that the Afghan Taliban's rise has led to the TTP gaining confidence, and perhaps even some help/safe havens, though of course in the murky world of terrorism, it is difficult to ascertain who is backing whom and how alliances have formed and broken. The presence of the Islamic State or Daesh in the area adds to the complications and the question of who precisely is responsible for what kind of action and what factions in Pakistan they may be affiliated with or linked to.

The National Action Plan, with its broad charter of actions intended to stop terrorism, has never really been put into effect with the National Counter Terrorism Authority (Nacts) never coming into full operation as an agency to battle terrorism. This is a major loss to Pakistan, with many having held out hopes that the National Action Plan would eventually deal with terror and that the APS attack of 2014, with the sight of small children being carried to their funerals moving the nation into a temporary act of mass grief. But even that incident, it appeared, did not move authorities to take action to ensure such an attack never occurred again.

There are also serious political implications to what is happening. There have been threats made to politicians known to oppose the Taliban in KP, with Aimal Wali Khan, the son of the current ANP leader, being the most prominent among these. Aimal Wali Khan is a key politician in KP and the threats made to him, as well as to other leaders of the party, render it still less able to carry out political functions. The threat of terrorism has meant that such leaders of have been forced to build huge barriers in front of their houses and end the casual political gatherings which had taken place in these locations since the days of Bacha Khan, the man who began the movement which resulted in the formation of first NAP and then the ANP.

Of course, the ANP has not kept to the vision of Bacha Khan but it does remain a left-of-centre party, which deserves a place on the political landscape of a country which is devoid of a differentiation in ideology and thinking. The fact that its leaders, even at the regional and divisional levels, now fear holding rallies or going out to the public means that the party is less able to organize or carry forward its political mission. In other words, it has been strangulated to a point its blood supply is cut off and it has been left essentially helpless. So many of its leaders have been killed, and others threatened to a point where they no longer feel safe in taking on the political role that should be their right.

The question, of course, is what the government is doing to deal with this situation. In the first place, all politicians and all political activists deserve the right to organize, to associate, to assemble, and to put forward their views in a peaceful fashion as laid down by the constitution. This is no longer possible at least in KP and arguably in other parts of the country, notably Balochistan. At the same time, the police deserve protection as well and at the moment they are left totally exposed to the gunmen with little means in place to offer them the help and protection they require to escape the might of the militants who carry automatic guns and seem able to sweep on random police posts in remote areas as and when they choose.

Essentially, we are falling back to the kind of situation that existed before the war on terror and the actions initiated in 2009 when Asif Ali Zardari was the president of the country. We quite clearly need a new charter to battle terrorism and also the political will to declare it unacceptable and unlawful. At the moment that will is too weak and there have also been insinuations from some part of the political realm that the TTP is a force that may be worth talking to and taking into the mainstream. This should be unacceptable to any Pakistani who wishes to see a safer country and a place where all views are acceptable, civilians are safe, and girls are able to go to school.

We see before us what has happened so quickly to Afghanistan as it descends back into an age of darkness, essentially as a result of US mismanagement in that region of the world. We must do everything we can to prevent Pakistan falling into a similar situation and take united measures including all political parties to battle terror before it overtakes us.

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