**Tackling militancy**

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The January 30 terror attack inside a mosque in Peshawar has terrified the people of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), who had been warning the government of the possible resurgence of militancy for years now.

The attack, which has claimed the lives of at least 100 people besides injuring over 200, has widely been condemned by Pakistani leaders as well as the international community. It is the worst attack of this year so far, second to last year’s terrible attack that ripped through a mosque in Peshawar’s old city.

Besides condemning the attack, political leaders criticized former prime minister Imran Khan and accused him of making plans to resettle TTP militants in the erstwhile Fata. While it is true that Khan came up with the idea of engaging the outlawed TTP in talks and that he suggested that the banned outfit should be allowed to open their offices in the country, putting all the blame on the former PM is unfair.

Though we can recall Khan’s statement given right after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan where he said that Afghans had broken the shackles of slavery, we should not forget that Pakistan’s incumbent defence minister Khawaja Asif also celebrated the victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan. In his tweet, he implied that even though the West was powerful, Divine intervention helped the other side.

Both Khan and Asif ignored the fact that the TTP revolted against the Pakistani state and justified its actions by claiming that since Islamabad did not side with the Afghan Taliban in the aftermath of the US attack on the Mullah Omar regime, TTP militants were justified in attacking the Pakistani forces. It was this ideological proximity between the Afghan and Pakistan Taliban that prompted militants in the erstwhile Fata to host the fleeing Afghan Taliban leaders and militants because they considered them ‘muhajir’, assuming themselves as ‘ansaar’.

Pakistan’s U-turn with regard to the Afghan Taliban after the 9/11 attacks was the main factor that infuriated jihadi and sectarian outfits in the country, prompting them to join hands and wreak havoc across the country, killing thousands of Pakistanis besides causing losses of billions of dollars.

It was not only Asif and Khan who tried to appease the Taliban. But from the late dictator General Zia to Hameed Gul, to right-wing Nawaz Sharif, to liberal Benazir Bhutto, to the nationalist ANP, to the religious JUI-F, all share some blame for encouraging the Taliban.

Didn’t Naseerullah Babar – right under the nose of Benazir Bhutto – declare the Afghan Taliban as ‘our children’? Didn’t Hameed Gul consider TTP militants as misguided youths? Were it not the nationalist ANP and the liberal PPP that introduced nizam-e-adl in Swat to placate extremists? Didn’t Shehbaz Sharif, as the CM of Punjab, ask the TTP militants not to target Punjab at a time when the group was carrying out a series of terror attacks across the country? There was a time when the Muttahid Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) government led by the JUI-F turned a blind eye to the activities of extremist forces in KP.

What has been done cannot be undone. Let us bury the past, move forward and accept some bitter truths. We cannot have peace in our country if our neighbour is under fire and will have to put an end to our hypocritical approach. There should not be any difference between what we say and what we practice. If we want democracy in Afghanistan, we should not support those who have taken over Kabul without a popular vote.

If we want our women to get education, walk freely, find employment and do businesses, we should not throw our unflinching support behind those who have turned a war-torn country into a giant prison for women and girls. If we want to respect human rights in our country, we should seek the same in the region and elsewhere.

It is unfortunate that we advocate the sacredness of the vote in Pakistan but want to see Afghans deprived of this right. Since Afghanistan is no more under occupation, we must persuade the Afghan Taliban to hold free and fair elections. If they are confident about their popularity, they should be certain about their victory.

The Afghan Taliban must understand that democracy – with all its demerits – is the only system that ensures the peaceful transition of power. First, they took over Kabul with the help of force, and now the IS is trying to do the same against their regime.

People may ask why Afghanistan should be mentioned in Pakistan’s internal security matters. The answer is clear: our security is closely linked to what happens in the neighbouring country. If the Afghan Taliban agree to contest elections in Afghanistan, the TTP will lose its justification for waging a war against the Pakistan state.

Apart from changing our Afghan policy, we will also have to take other measures. The international community and Middle Eastern states also share some responsibility for the mess that we are in. These states along with the US pumped billions of dollars into this extremist ideology.

Today, Saudi Arabia seems determined to transform its conservative kingdom into a modern society that respects human rights and promotes science and technology. Our ruling elite that claims to enjoy cordial ties with Riyadh should seek its support, requesting the country to help us turn religious seminaries into places of modern learning where subjects like science, mathematics, chemistry, biology, etc, are also taught.

Also, we must teach our seminary students the skills that can help them find livelihood. More than two million students are believed to be studying at 36,000 registered madrassahs. Teaching them how to work as mechanics, auto electricians, plumbers, carpenters, medical assistants and computer operators may help them find employment after completing their courses that have little relevance to job markets. Drastic changes to our syllabus and scrapping obscurantist laws would also be helpful in battling the ideology of religious bigotry that prompts people to join militant outfits and challenge the writ of the state. All the retrogressive laws that were enacted by our past governments should also be abolished.

Mere condemnation and blame game will not help. Allegations will only encourage the TTP to dismiss politicians as selfish, incompetent and corrupt. It is time our political elite thought of socio-economic measures to tackle the resurgence of militancy.

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