

Find Your War, Or Risk Losing It

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Pakistan can still win the war against 'jihadi' militancy without having prior political consensus, which is proving elusive, if its security forces function coherently. Victory will be surer, swifter, and achieved on terms more favourable to state sovereignty and democracy if there were agreement among the main political forces in the country.

The war against 'jihadi' militancy is politically divisive in Pakistan even though, or perhaps because, it was always going to be the most important issue facing the state and society. A suicide attack on Islamabad's posh Marriott Hotel killed over 50 people a few hours after the newly-elected president, Asif Ali Zardari delivered his inaugural address to parliament. It was suspected that the intended target was the parliament where the entire political and military leadership of the country was assembled. Then, on the third day of the Eid festivities, the Pashtun nationalist Awami National Party (ANP) chief Asfandyar Wali Khan survived an assassination attempt in Charsadda. Instead of uniting political opinion, these attacks further exposed the fissures.

In the meanwhile, pressure mounted along the Afghanistan frontier as the United States (US) troops carried out cross-border missile attacks on suspected militant hideouts killing dozens of civilians including women and children. The US upped the ante by acknowledging for the first time that troops had actually landed on Pakistani soil and killed a number of people including civilians and suspected combatants. The military drive in the Bajaur tribal territory and in Swat district in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) continued. It was reported that militants had been forced to retreat in both these areas, and that Bajaur had become a testing ground for the nerve and stamina of the army. Estimates of people displaced from these areas now run into hundreds of thousands, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) officially declared Pakistan a war zone. Tribal militias were reported to have risen against the Taliban and Al Qaida in a number of regions including Dir, Kurram, Buner, and Salarzai. This was seen as a major new development in the war through much of which the tribes had acquiesced to Taliban incursions and takeovers.

Just as the war intensified so, paradoxically, did the debate over whose war it was anyway – America's or ours. This debate was made all the more sharper with the exit of Pervez Musharraf. Opposition to him had obscured the major divisions between his opponents on the war against jihadi militancy. In particular the two main protagonists – the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) – had been able to blur over the gap between their respective positions. The PPP had denounced Musharraf for not fighting hard or consistently, while the PML-N had accused him of adopting a needlessly aggressive approach at the behest of the Americans. In the political spectrum the ANP and the Mutahida Quami Movement (MQM) – both avowedly secular – stand with the PPP. The PML-N position is supported by the Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), Imran Khan and what seems like a majority of opinion-makers in newspaper columns and television talk shows.

Outrageous and Outlandish

The "right-wing" argument – for want of better shorthand – is that Pakistan should stop fighting America's war against jihadi militancy. Instead, there should be positive political engagement with the militants and a negotiated settlement. Some variants of this argument stretch to actually confronting the US and Kabul. It is assumed that once Pakistan stops supporting the US the militants will end their attacks against targets in Pakistan, and will withdraw to a peaceful life. There seems to be an unshakeable belief, perhaps born out of desperation, that jihadi militants do not nurture political ambitions within Pakistan.

This discourse tries to rationalise all glaring evidence of jihadi stridency as defensive actions. When rationalisation runs out of steam there is always the option of blaming someone else: it is not the jihadis, but miscreants, trying to defame jihad (including Indian and Israeli agents!), that have been blowing up girls' schools and publicly beheading lowly public officials and local residents who do not fall in line. There seems to be only one rule in the

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evolution of this narrative: the more outrageous the crime, the more outlandish the rationalisation.

“This is not Pakistan’s war” also happens to be the stated position of Al Qaida. According to Adam Yahiye Gadahn, reputed to be a spokesman for the shadowy terrorist outfit:

The Pakistan Army and the professional spreaders of lies at their service are trying to make us believe that the state of Pakistan has turned a new leaf. These are not the leaders Pakistan wants and deserves. They are the leaders America wants and preserves in order to reach its policy objectives, hinder the jihad against the crusaders in Afghanistan ... and ensure that nuclear-capable Pakistan remains docile, contained and ‘shariah’-free. Their battle has always been and remains to be America’s battle, not Pakistan’s. And this battle (against militants) is what has brought Pakistan to the verge of break-up.¹

The mindless millions who voted for the present leaders must obviously await an Al Qaida approved list of leaders that Pakistan “wants and deserves” while suicidal assassins go about eliminating the “professional spreaders of lies”.

History of Deceit and Betrayal

Why is a major chunk of the political mainstream unwilling to take the jihadi head on? What explains the confusion of a good part of the intelligentsia about something that is seen by virtually everyone outside the country as an existential threat to the state? Two factors are salient. First, for generations of Pakistanis who have grown up with American lies, duplicity and double standards, it is the cry wolf moment. They remember a time when Afghan jihadis and their sponsors in Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and beyond were America’s favourite freedom fighters. Al Qaida was but a register of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-backed Arab fighters brought to Peshawar to confront the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

For those with shorter memories the run-up to the Iraq war is a more recent reminder of American deceit. At home, Pakistanis saw the neocons propping up Musharraf while waxing lyrical about democracy. Subsequent us course correction, particularly after Republican defeats in the Congressional elections in 2006, meant greater attention to Afghanistan

and Pakistan. The long-drawn us engagement with the PPP leadership in order to effect a transition to democracy and the passing of the Biden-Lugar bill were all part of this course correction.² Pakistanis who felt betrayed once too often by us perfidy, find it easy to believe in the jihadis’ war.

Second, and more importantly, the confusion in the political mainstream is a reflection of the pro-jihadi policy of the state over the decades, particularly since the late 1970s. The symbiotic relationship between the state security apparatus and jihadi militancy – in Afghanistan, Kashmir, and within Pakistan – was widely publicised and acknowledged by all military leaders since general Zia-ul-Haq. The jihadi infrastructure, however, does not consist only of training camps, weapon depots, and secret channels of finance. It was supported by an ideological infrastructure that promoted extreme and violent Sunni sectarianism, mixed with a narrative of perpetual worldwide conspiracies against Muslims. The militant world view draws upon elements that already exist within the theological and political mainstream, but creates an explosive mixture when combined with the praxis of armed struggle.

Is the Military on Board?

There is a third source of confusion that is the least debated, but is the most critical in determining the outcome of the war. It is too early to tell if the state security apparatus has actually reformed or even significantly diluted its position vis-à-vis jihadi militancy. If the Pakistani military continues to see the jihad infrastructure as an asset for future use within Pakistan and outside – in other words, continue with the double-game in the us-led war on terror crafted by Musharraf – there will be reasons for sections of the political

mainstream to persist with a softer line too. A clear and unambiguous change of heart in the military will be the surest tonic for the confused civilians.

It is not surprising that the PPP, ANP and to some extent the MQM have taken an unequivocal position on the war against jihadi militancy, while parties of the “right” with stronger historical connections with the military remain ambivalent to say the least. The former have their genesis in political battles against Islamic radicalism, and do not need to wait for the military’s redefinition of the national interest – this time away from jihadi militancy – in order to determine their own political views. The latter, particularly the PML-N, will have to find a way to reverse their rhetoric if they see that Pakistan’s military too has made the shift.

PML-N can either lead the “right” to a national consensus or wait to see if the military is on board. Taking the lead will strengthen the hands of the civilian democrats vis-à-vis the military and the us. A wait-and-see approach has two possible outcomes. If the military is on board, the war will be won but with greater kudos to the generals and more concessions to the us than need be the case if the political mainstream were united. If the military is not on board the war is as good as lost regardless of what the PML-N decides – and the idea of a sovereign, let alone democratic, Pakistan will begin to fade. For PML-N the choice between leading and waiting ought to be a no-brainer. Going by past record, however, I will cross my fingers but not hold my breath on this one.

NOTES

- 1 ‘US Still Runs Pakistan: Al Qaida Figure,’ *Dawn*, October 5, 2008.
- 2 The Biden-Lugar bill promises \$ 15 billion in assistance to Pakistan, linking the aid with strengthening democracy and de-linking it with military operations.

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