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Talibanisation of Pakistan: End of the Road?

Khuram Iqbal

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The Pakistani Taliban is losing public sympathy. The possibility of it turning into a socio-political movement like Hizbullah in Lebanon is highly unlikely. In fact, the Pakistani Taliban has evolved into a terrorist group.

THE INTERNATIONAL intervention in Afghanistan has had the unintended effect of giving birth to a new brand of militants in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan. These fighters, who later came to know as “Pakistani Taliban”, inspired like-minded groups across Pakistan to wage an armed struggle against foreign forces in Afghanistan.

Over time, however, they turned inwards and diverted their attention towards Pakistan. They vowed to establish a political and administrative domain that would have Islamist features similar to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. They also have an ideological agenda of making their domain available to other movements that share their Islamist agenda. “Talibanisation”, as a generic term, has since been used to define a combination of the Pakistani Taliban’s ideological and political ambitions.

Shift Against Taliban

Initially, the anti-American cause to liberate Afghanistan from “foreign occupation” provided Pakistani Taliban with a much-needed legitimacy amongst the local population. For many, the Pakistani Taliban represented a religious movement, not necessarily hostile to Pakistan and not necessarily an enemy of the people. Despite the deadly terrorist attacks carried out by Pakistani Taliban across the country, the popular media was reluctant to call them “terrorists”. Public sympathy and an apologetic attitude towards Taliban and their ideology gave rise to expectations that Pakistani Taliban might transform into a socio-political movement like Hizbullah in Lebanon.

However, in view of the Taliban-linked atrocities that unfolded since the rise of Talibanisation in 2004, the tide has turned. The Pakistani Taliban has not been able to maintain public support, which is essential to launch a mass movement. More and more Pakistanis, as well as the popular media, are becoming critical of them. The Pakistani Taliban are now regularly being depicted in the media as

terrorists. This loss of public support has significantly reduced the possibility of the Pakistani Taliban transforming into a socio-political movement.

What caused this shift? There is no one reason for the current failure of Talibanisation in Pakistan. A series of interrelated issues and events changed public opinion and created a hostile environment for Pakistani Taliban to advance their ideological and political agenda.

Taliban's own Tactical and Strategic Blunders

Pakistan, with the help of the international community, has been battling the Taliban on both operational and ideological fronts since early 2004. A comprehensive strategy has been implemented by the Pakistani government to eliminate them as an effective fighting force, while addressing the material grievances in the Taliban areas. But more than anything, the Taliban's own tactical and strategic blunders cost them vital public support.

They have been using the brutal tactics of beheadings and suicide bombings which were anathema to Pakistani society, and which allowed mainstream religious scholars to attack the religious legitimacy of such tactics. The frequent use and public display of these tactics failed to take into consideration the religious and social realities of Pakistan and the possible opposition to such tactics. Additionally, the shift in targeting by suicide bombers -- from security forces to the general public -- turned supporters into angry opponents.

Initially suicide attacks against the security forces were largely viewed as "justified" by a large segment of Pakistani society, because the Army and other law enforcement agencies were misperceived by the masses as mercenaries fighting the unpopular US war on Pakistani soil. That substantially changed when Islamist death squads started targeting public places, funerals and mosques. Even when the attacks were against "legitimate" targets, the bombings caused considerable "collateral damage" which wore down public support. It resulted in a huge strategic failure for the Taliban and their associates as they lost public sympathy for their cause.

Other incidents reinforced this strategic miscalculation. The assassination of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto; attacks on the Sri Lankan cricket team and the Marriott Hotel; the flogging of a 16-year-old girl in Swat; and the killings of leading religious scholars like Maulana Hasan Jan and Mufti Sarfaraz Naeemi; all served to undermine the Taliban's standing. The public understood that the Pakistani Taliban want nothing less than the capture of the whole of Pakistan in order to create a cloak of religious zealotry.

People have seen the savagery with which the Taliban have treated innocent Pakistanis. Between 2003 and 2008 the casualties in Taliban-related violence numbered more than 20,000 including civilians and security personnel. In the 1965 War with its traditional rival India, Pakistani casualties stood at 4,000. For these reasons, there is an emerging consensus in Pakistan that the internal threat posed by Taliban is far greater than any external threat.

Internal Fragmentation

The above blunders are surmountable, but the strategic objective of creating a mass movement capable of taking power in Pakistan seems increasingly remote -- even more so given the fragmented nature of the Pakistani Taliban. Unlike the Afghan Taliban, the Pakistani Taliban are not a monolithic entity. Pakistani Taliban are divided into various groups though they are nominally under the *Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP) umbrella. Sectarian issues, geographic divisions, tribal politics as well as the fierce independence adhered to by the various factions suggest that there is little chance the TTP can actually take power.

Victory, as remote as that seems, would take on the appearance of pre-Taliban Afghanistan. Disunity among Pakistani Taliban does not diminish the threat. A fragmented Taliban would always pose a serious threat by creating more chaos and instability in the country but they might not be able to win the hearts and minds of common Pakistanis.

It is assessed that the Pakistani Taliban have lost the capacity for mass mobilisation and to advance as an insurgent movement. In fact the Pakistani Taliban have evolved from a movement into a terrorist group with declining public support in Pakistan.

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