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Pakistan

Why we cannot hang extremism

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The passing of the 21st constitutional amendment with no one voting against it apparently seems a victory for Mian Nawaz Sharif. However, there are reports of dissent within the PPP and the PML-N. Raza Rabbani breaking down into tears and publically admitting that the voting against his 'conscience' indicates the massive pressures the parliamentarians felt while voting for the amendment.

These are difficult times for the Sharif government. 'Military courts under a civilian government's authority' is a claim hard to digest. From a position of separating the military from running the affairs of the state to justifying military courts, things have taken a big U-turn.

Although the Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam had agreed to the amendment, they changed their minds after looking at the possible outcome of such courts. They would have lost their support among hard-liners. Their insistence to remove madressahs and religion from the text of the amendments was not without reason. Most of their supporters in madressahs would have opposed them on the issue.

The fact is that most of the terrorist activities have had a link with madressahs one way or the other and were carried out in the name of religion. It is the first time that the PML-N government has not given in to the religious parties on the pretext of forging a consensus and has preferred to go ahead and forced them to abstain.

Instead of strengthening a civilian government in the aftermath of the massacre in Peshawar, all the political parties have agreed to change the rules of the game in favour of military generals. A massive media campaign to justify this awkward position of the civilian government has given ordinary citizens the illusion that our military capabilities can root out fundamentalism through military courts and speedy trials. And the ideas of the ruling classes normally become the consciousness of the many.

The Peshawar incident has changed many things. It was a turning point. Revolution and big incidents are always game-changers. Tahirul Qadri's 'revolution' could not take place, but Imran Khan's 'change' is seen everywhere. From a position of nothing less than the resignation of the prime minister to total cooperation with the PML-N government – with national security as justification – there has been a massive change in Imran Khan's strategy. Both are in a losing position. The military is the one that gained authority and credibility.

All the plans of the PML-N to try Gen Musharraf for constitutional breach have been shattered. Instead of trying the generals, the civilian government is more worried about completing its own tenure. To be on 'one page' with all the parliamentary political parties and the military the PML-N has to pay a heavy price. This is almost like the eighties, when Mian Nawaz Sharif was a minister and chief minister under a military government with full patronage of the generals. The only difference is that he is now prime minister.

It is not just the PML-N that is changing. Others are also following the fashionable trend of 'taking everyone along'. The PPP, National Party, MQM, Jamaat-e-Islami, Awami National Party, you name it and they are on the same bandwagon. After initial hesitation, the PPP and ANP agreed to the rules of the game.

The PPP has not learnt any lessons at all. They have been victims of the establishment's direct and indirect rules since the formation of the party in 1967. However, this trend is not new for them. They saluted Musharraf on his humiliating departure from power and are now complaining that he is conspiring to overthrow their provincial

government in Sindh.

The one who happy in this happy family is Imran Khan and his colleagues in the PTI and elsewhere. They have worked hard to come to this position. Three months of dharnas, long marches, massive public meetings, huge media coverage, all had one main aim: the PML-N should not take the route that they are on. No normal relations with India, no actions against generals or the Taliban but 'talks' – this was the hidden agenda of the PTI. The Peshawar incident gave them a justification and they are now back to business as usual.

All is not lost by the suggestion of establishing military courts. The plan of action against terrorism has touched some grey areas, which was hard to imagine some months earlier. Madressahs and their alleged links with terrorism have come into the debate. This used to be a no-go area. When the interior minister said that 90 percent of madressahs are not linked to terrorism, the admissions was that maybe the rest of the 10 percent are.

Maulana Aziz of Lal Masjid refused to condemn the Peshawar incident. This used to be a routine habit of extremists – justifying any terrorist act by blaming American counter attacks. And extremists were not alone in such supporting arguments for terrorists. The PTI and others had the same logic. 'It is not our war', 'the Taliban are our brothers', 'they are also Pakistani', 'let us divide them by prioritising the good and the bad Taliban and so on. However, the times have changed.

The plan of action against terrorism is an effort to rethink strategies without changing the pattern of thinking towards extremism. It is a quick state response to the growing hatred of ordinary people against terrorism. It is a desperate effort to satisfy the desperate parents of all those children going to school. There is a great need to redress the whole issue. It is time to look back and learn lessons. The state cannot eliminate extremism without eliminating the root cause. And that is the role of the state towards religion. Some things can never be religious.

Electricity is not Muslim or Hindu. It is just electricity. So is a state – just a state. We have experienced enough problems in the shape of massacres. The parties represented in parliament have to change the pattern of thinking if they want to an effective response to fanaticisms.

The recipe of military courts for speedy and effective justice for hard-core terrorists has been rightly opposed by almost all progressive parties, groups and civil society actors. It will be a whitewash. Hangings cannot change the course of history. Ideas cannot be hanged, only bodies can. We have to get rid of extremism that teaches that killing is a solution. That is true for terrorists as well as for the state.

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