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Pakistan

After the Peshawar massacre of 141 children, Imran Khan's retreat

- IV Online magazine - 2015 - IV481 - February 2015 -

Publication date: Sunday 1 February 2015

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The dharna convention by the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) on January 18 had some distinct features. For the first time, Imran Khan chose not to be aggressive, agitated or offensive. It was a retreat from his previous attitude. His usual criticism of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) PML-N government for rigging and stealing the general elections was replaced by “all efforts to build a new Khyber Pakhtunkhwa”.

And this was not accidental or a change of tactics. The protest by a handful of the Peshawar victims' parents has made a huge impact on the PTI's changing position. The KP ministers' initial policy of rebuttal in an offensive manner backfired. All this is a natural outcome of Imran Khan's political blunder of launching an untimely agitation to overthrow the PML-N government.

Imran's changed calmer tone was a reflection of the present political scenario. Most of his strategies for dealing with growing extremism have been rejected by the circumstances he has had to face in recent weeks. Arguments like ‘this is not our war, it is America's war’, ‘why should we fight another country's war?’, ‘we must differentiate between the good and the bad Taliban’, ‘tribal people are different’ – are not repeated any more.

The speeches at the dharna convention were an explicit manifestation of the PTI leadership at a loose end. They had to listen to the people's verdict – ‘do a good job in KP and then come back to us’. The PTI felt the pain of the parents in protest. Imran Khan's ‘no protocol letter and back to KP’ was an exercise to control the damage.

The Peshawar incident changed the consciousness of many Pakistanis in a decisive manner. Even the military establishment had to change its decade-long security paradigm strategies. The PTI is no exception. It had to abandon its dharna politics and political tone.

The rising extremism resulting in terrorist activities cannot be challenged by softening your views towards them or offering concessions. You offer them an inch, they will take a mile. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto tried this and not only failed but lost his life as well. In 1977, to cool down a right-wing challenge on the issue of rigging elections, Bhutto offered Fridays off instead of Sundays, a ban on alcohol etc. That accelerated the agitation rather than taming it. The ultimate result was a military coup led by Ziaul Haq on July 5, 1977.

Imran Khan's strategy towards the Taliban was more like Bhutto's 1977 tactics. It failed then, and it failed now. The extremists took full advantage of Imran Khan's softer tone and went on the offensive; the net result was the most barbaric incident in the history of Pakistan. The killing of 141 children by militants shattered many myths.

After every terrorist activity the most popular argument by religious groups has been that it is the work of RAW and Mossad. They would easily blame foreign hands. Another argument to favour this was that those who were killed had not been circumcised. All these false arguments have not been used this time.

Chaudhry Nisar's first press conference after the Peshawar incident emphasised that those involved in the Peshawar barbaric murders were Pakistanis. His own PML-N had to change its position on the ‘good and bad’ Taliban by accepting that they are all the same.

Seldom have we seen in such a short space of time the failure of strategies as those of the PTI towards the Taliban. A rising political tide without an ideology cannot last long. The charisma of personality to popularise politics without a

proper ideology is a short-term phenomenon.

Imran Khan's present popularity is because of the recent unpopularity of Mian Nawaz Sharif's neo-liberal policies, particularly in the energy sector. Imran's retreat was the only reasonable option left. Much is lost but not all. The PTI can regain some lost constituency if it is able to do what it says about KP.

However, all efforts to bring 'change and revolution' mainly through the media failed miserably. Dharna politics were not a genuine mass mobilisation but an organised effort through the growing popularity of Imran Khan to change the name of the game. It could not go very far.

Right-wing politics has its own limitations. It has to be within the circle of a certain ideology. Organising a mass public meeting is different in character than calling a general strike – the most effective tool of political damage to opponents. The lonely call of a 'Pakistan band' was not successful. A revolution in a counter-revolutionary period was just not possible.

Thursday, January 22, 2015

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[1] sit-in, mass public meeting