

Opinion: Will Terrorism Hijack the Pakistani Elections?

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First published in the Daily Times of Pakistan, 22 April 2013.¹

Pakistan expects a historic general election in 2013 which might be jeopardized by terrorist attacks. For the first time, a momentous democratic transition – in which one democratically elected government, after completing its full term, will succeed another – is about to take place. Yet many suspect that if the fresh bout of violence from militant groups continues, furthering chaos and lawlessness, the expected general election might not happen.

Militancy continues to be the hydra-headed beast that the top Pakistani leadership has failed to slay. The critical question remains: Is the Pakistani leadership willing to tackle this breeding problem or is it comfortable with remaining habitually complacent?

The New Year brought shameful and dreaded assaults by extremist groups on the Pakistani Shia community. Groups such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi have long regarded Shia Muslims as heretics. Stepping up attacks recently, the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (a banned organization) are thought to have set up several training camps for militants, and have access to large quantities of weapons and explosives.

The brutality started when 81 people were killed and 121 injured in a suicide car bomb blasts in Quetta's Alamdar Road area on the night of then 10th of January 2013.² Lashkar-e-Jhangvi claimed responsibility for the attack. The majority of the people killed in the Alamdar Road blasts belonged to the Hazara Shia community. The massacre led to a mass protest carrying 87 coffins demanding the removal of the Baluchistan government, imposition of governor rule in the province and deployment of army in Quetta. The Hazara community bemoaned that a severe lack of provincial governance had lately turned Quetta into a killing field for the religious-ethnic minority. They refused to bury their loved ones until their demands were accepted. On the 13th of January, the government succumbed to their demands, and the prime minister – after dismissing Chief Minister Nawab Aslam Raisani – placed Baluchistan under governor rule.³

The aggression continued when the same Hazara Shia community was targeted again in Quetta on the 16th of February 2013.⁴ This time at least 88 people were killed and almost 200 wounded when a large explosion occurred near a market at the busy Kirani road. The casualties included a large number of women and children. Following the attack, major protests took place not only in Quetta but also other parts of Pakistan. The banned Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) again accepted responsibility for the deadly bomb blast and vowed to continue its anti-Shia operations despite governor rule.

After a fortnight, Pakistan saw terrorist attacks on the Shia community sprouting in Karachi. Another instance of mass bloodshed took place on the evening of the 3rd of March 2013 in Abbas town (a Shia-dominated area of Karachi)

1 Hasan, Kiran, 'VIEW: Will terrorism highjack the Pakistani elections?', 2 April 2013, http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2013%5C04%5C02%5Cstory_2-4-2013_pg3_4 (22 April 2013)

2 Saleem Shahid, 'At least 93 lives lost in Quetta explosions', 11 January, 2013, Dawn.com Newspaper on the Web, <http://dawn.com/2013/01/11/at-least-93-lives-lost-in-quetta-explosions/> (22 April 2013)

3 'Governor rule to be imposed in Balochistan', 13 January, 2013, Dawn.com Latest News on the Web, <http://dawn.com/2013/01/13/governor-rule-possible-raisani-ready-to-resign/> (22 April 2013)

4 Syed Ali Shah & News Agencies, 'Large blast rips through Quetta; 63 killed', 16 February, 2013 Dawn.com, <http://dawn.com/2013/02/16/large-blast-hits-quetta-at-least-five-wounded/> (22 April 2013)

where at least 45 people, including women and children, were killed and 140 injured after two powerful bomb blasts.⁵ No group claimed responsibility for planting these bombs, which went off near a mosque where worshippers were leaving for evening prayers. The people in Karachi went on strike protesting against the attack bringing Karachi to a halt. For the next couple of days schools and businesses remained closed, paralysing Pakistan's financial capital.

Following Karachi's attack major public unrest prompted the attention of the Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhary who after visiting Karachi took *suo moto* notice of the bombing.⁶ Public anger again was directed at the government and the main complaint was that the law enforcement agencies and other government officials did not reach the venue in time for the rescue operation after the attack. As a result the civilians struggled to manage the situation whilst bringing out bodies from the debris for hours.

Already hearing a case over the earlier bombings in Quetta, the Supreme Court ordered authorities to come up with a strategy to protect Shias in Quetta and Karachi. Consequently, top police official the Inspector General of Sindh, was also dismissed.

Around the same time Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Ashfaq Pervaiz Kayani visited Karachi where he was briefed on the security situation in the country's financial capital.⁷ On his return corps commanders held a meeting under him at the Army General Headquarters (GHQ) in Rawalpindi. Discussing the country's internal security situation along with professional matters pertaining to the armed forces, the military leadership was given a special briefing on the law and order situation in the cities of Karachi and Quetta. The next day General Kayani told President Zardari that the army was willing to do whatever was required, such as the 2009 operation in Swat, to achieve stability in the currently troubled provinces of Sindh and Baluchistan.

Meanwhile the Pakistani government faced strong international condemnation after the attacks. In an official statement made by the US Ambassador Richard Olson, intolerance and indiscriminate violence against innocent civilians posed a threat to a prosperous future for Pakistani citizens.⁸ The spokeswoman of the Chinese Foreign Minister Hua Chunying stated in a press briefing that China opposes all forms of terrorism. The French Foreign Minister Philippe Lalliot said that France offers its condolences to the victims' relatives and reiterates its support to the Pakistani people in the fight against terrorism. And finally, a recent statement by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh explained, in his words, that "There cannot be normalisation of relations between our two countries unless and until the terror machine which is still active in Pakistan is brought under control".⁹

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan unveiled its 'State of Human Rights in 2012' report which concludes that Pakistan is 'on the verge' of becoming an undemocratic society where individuals are increasingly resorting to violence for undue demands.¹⁰ The Commission found that Pakistan suffered 1,577 terrorist attacks in 2012, which killed some 2,050 civilians. At least 2,284 people died in Karachi alone due to ethnic, sectarian, and political violence.¹¹

The lack of a comprehensive counterterrorism operation is fast dragging the country into international isolation and domestic discord, as it becomes a global epicentre for terrorist camps. If urgent and sincere efforts are not taken by the top Pakistani leadership in rooting out terrorism, the militant organizations might interfere in Pakistan's first democratic transition.

If militant groups continue to attack innocent civilians in major cities, military operations might be the only available option to provide respite to the already bleeding cities. If a military operation takes place then the chances of holding a general election seem rather remote.

If the political and military leadership prioritizes a militant-free Pakistan over a bloody general election by backing a national interim government – to provide the much needed immediate relief for a short period of time – they will demonstrate that they are ready to embrace this small hiccup for the larger national interest. In that case, Pakistan may not commemorate its extraordinary democratic transition – but it would experience an equally critical, much-needed defining moment in its civil–military relationship, worthy of celebration.

5 Web Desk / Reuters, '40 dead in twin Karachi blasts', The Express Tribune (with the International Herald Tribune), 3 March 2013, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/515201/blast-heard-in-karachi/> (22 April 2013)

6 Khaleej Times, 'CJ takes suo moto notice of Karachi blast', 6 March 2013, http://www.khaleejtimes.com/displayarticle.aspx?file=data/international/2013/March/international_March174.xml§ion=international&col= (22 April 2013)

7 Web Desk, 'Army willing to act if called upon: Kayani', 8 March 2013, The Express Tribune (with the International Herald Tribune), <http://tribune.com.pk/story/517684/army-willing-to-do-the-necessary-if-called-upon-kayani/> (22 April 2013)

8 Source: Radio Pakistan programme (in Urdu), Islamabad, 15.10 GMT, 4 March, 2013

9 Pakistan Today, 'No normal ties with Pakistan until it ends terror: Singh', 9 March, 2013, <http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2013/03/09/news/national/no-normal-ties-with-pakistan-until-it-ends-terror-singh-2/> (22 April 2013)

10 Michael Kugelman, 'Pakistan's protest vote' (AfPak) FP, 5 April 2013, http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/04/04/pakistans_protest_vote (22 April 2013)

11 Jennifer Rowland, 'Dismal findings in Human Rights Commission of Pakistan annual report' (AfPak) FP, 5 April 2013, http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/04/05/dismal_findings_in_human_rights_commission_of_pakistan_annual_report (22 April 2013)