

ANALYSIS: Deep trouble —*Rasul Bakhsh Rais*

To solve its multiple security threats, Pakistan needs to evolve a long-term strategy of social and political reconstruction; invoking national spirit and solidarity must rest at the centre of such a strategy

Pakistan faces several complex internal security challenges today that require a comprehensive, holistic and national response. Not addressing these challenges immediately, in a serious and consistent fashion, may land the country and its peoples in serious trouble. So what are these challenges; wherein lie their roots; what can be done to tackle them efficiently and effectively?

Taliban militancy and organised violence against the state and society presents the most serious threat to national security. The grimness of this threat lies in its religious roots and radical worldview. The Taliban movement is a variant of political Islamism that has renounced democratic, constitutional and political paths to power and instead believes in the theory and practice of conquest in the image of medieval adventurers. The problem is that the national and international atmosphere today is different. We now live in territorial nation states and bounded political communities. The Taliban and their allied religious groups reject the territorial state and maintain transnational political and ideological links that spread across the globe. They have a mutual support system, sanctuaries, and common sources of funding and share a common vision and project of terrorising, defeating and replacing the present state structure, which in their view doesn't represent Islam or the 'real' interests of Muslims. Their narrative of historic grievances against the local and global order and critique of the national ruling classes 'naturally' facilitates their political communication with the disempowered, unskilled, and unemployable youth in the socially and economically depressed regions of Pakistan.

Social structures that shape power relations, determine the social significance of individuals and groups and allocate political roles are neither just nor based on prudence and rationality. Dominant groups like the land-owning class, caste and tribal elites and the gadinashheens have monopolised the social and political spaces of value. They could continue in their privileged positions, without a major challenge, were they to fulfil the role that similar conservative, status quo social groups in other societies have performed; being responsive to society and responsible in their exercise of power while pushing society forward through an emphasis on equity and equality. Even members of the middle class, which play a subordinate role in the dynastic party system, have joined in the rapaciousness of the ruling groups. This doesn't send a message of hope to the disenfranchised youth and disillusioned social classes. The frustration of these classes has thus proved a fertile ground for the Taliban insurgency and Islamic radicalism.

Our focus on contemporary violence and its optics shouldn't divert our attention from a larger and more complex issue of the sociology of violence; the social conditions that promote and breed violent beliefs and practices.

The second and equally dangerous category of security challenges comes from sectarian groups. Communalism and sectarianism are rooted in the intolerance of difference and diversity of faiths. Much of the religious violence in the subcontinent and its more frequent eruption and persistence in Pakistan is rooted in unarticulated but easily discernable form of religious fascism.

The irrational logic that animates this universal brand is absolute self-righteousness and denial of the religious authenticity of other religious sects within Islam. Unfortunately, theological and philosophical debates around these issues have become politicised; so have the sectarian leaders who use sect and sectarian mobilisation to maintain power within the country and abroad. Sectarian groups live, hide, plan and execute sectarian violence from deep within society. They work in multiple organisations, and it is the complex web of their relationship with 'ordinary' members of society that makes the security situation so intractable.

Militant ethnic movements in Karachi and Balochistan pose yet another set of internal security challenges. Ethnic feelings are natural and mobilisation of ethnic identity to stake a claim on national power and resources is neither an uncommon strategy, nor out of the fold of normal political discourses or processes. But this can be done legitimately within the limits of law and the framework of peaceful political struggle. Violence by any ethnic group and any attempt to hold local populations political hostage must provoke a national security response. We have seen much ethnic violence in Karachi in the past and sporadically in Balochistan. Violence, ethnic or religious, starts when there is no room for argument; when the political process is seen as flawed or inadequate.

There are relatively easy remedies for ethnic violence. These remedies lie in the political realm; in understanding the ethnic and cultural pluralism of Pakistani society and devising a political order that accommodates the legitimate aspirations of all social groups.

The elected government at the federal level has not realised the seriousness of militant ethnicity and has failed to bring about

constitutional reforms on which there is national consensus to grant greater rights to the provinces. The lopsided distribution of power and resources between the centre and the provinces must not be allowed to linger on. Federalism is a dynamic process, and must be so especially in conditions of ethnic diversity, where adjusting and balancing the requirements of national cohesion with demands of the units for adequate power and resources is a pressing issue.

Another factor that has greatly multiplied troubles in Pakistan is the thirty-year-long war in Afghanistan, first against the former Soviet Union and now the United States. Contestation between foreign powers, apparently helping to rebuild Afghanistan, and the forces resisting them, has influenced Pakistan's national security in more ways than one. Our role in mobilising religion and nationalism to defeat the Soviets under Washington's cold war strategic outlook is now become the albatross around our neck.

To solve its multiple security threats, Pakistan needs to evolve a long-term strategy of social and political reconstruction; invoking national spirit and solidarity must rest at the centre of such a strategy. The focus must be on political institutions, openness, rule of law, and accountability of the political class.

Dr Rasul Bakhsh Rais is author of Recovering the Frontier State: War, Ethnicity and State in Afghanistan (Oxford University Press, 2008) and a professor of Political Science at the Lahore University of Management Sciences. He can be reached at rasul@lums.edu.pk