

## Analysis: Endorsing surrender — *Abbas Rashid*



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Even before the ink has dried on the signed copy of the Nizam-e Adl Regulation 2009, the TNSM/Taliban leadership has seen it fit to clear up any confusion on the part of even the most optimistic among us.

It turns out that from their perspective, the agreement obliges them not to display arms — there can be no question of laying down arms, as this is not allowed by sharia. Second, the militants cannot be called to account for acts of violence or arson because religion obliges us to look to the future. Not least, it has been made clear that when the work of the militants is done in one place, they will move on to another area; which brings us back to why they will not dispense with their arms.

It is not as if any of this was hugely unexpected, but the sheer speed with which the militants have helped clarify the distinction between surrender and peace may have come as a bit of a surprise to some: at least 16 people were killed, including 10 policemen, and several others wounded after a suicide bomber slammed his explosive-laden vehicle into a police check-post in Charsadda on Wednesday.

It might in some ways have been better for President Asif Zardari to sign the document without bringing parliament into the proceedings. Even if we are to go by the support for this agreement on the part of the ANP, it is at best an agreement under duress. If the only defence against rampaging violence and destruction in the valley is an unequal agreement with the militants, so be it. But why give it the cover of endorsement by a majority in the National Assembly?

We must be thankful to PMLN MNA Ayaz Amir for registering his note of dissent during the session, followed afterwards by the PPP's Sherry Rehman. And then there is the walkout by the MQM that kept the consensus from becoming quite complete. Such are the ironies of politics and history.

In any case, it serves no purpose to make a virtue out of necessity. Far too many voices now want to make us believe that the Nizam-e Adl Regulation meets a longstanding demand of the people of the area. It is, of course, always difficult to know what is in people's hearts. But if it is a credibly articulated demand that we have in mind, then the elections just over a year ago tell a different story. The people of the area voted for liberal-secular parties such as the PPP and the ANP, and not the JUI, for instance.

And yet, within parliament as well as outside, there is an air of complacency overshadowed by confusion and fear. If ceding Swat was meant to appease the hunger of the militants, it has obviously served only to whet their appetite. On the other hand, there is still an acute lack of clarity about what is at stake. This is not about social repercussions and altered lifestyles. What is critical is the political implication of the Taliban's rigid and intolerant interpretation of what it means to be a Muslim. Imagine the level of tension and violence in a diverse polity ruled by the code of conduct that the Taliban seek to impose. Will the state structure be able to withstand the ensuing conflict and chaos?

We are not doing too well as it is. Certainly, Balochistan is also a reminder of how the state has not delivered. The recent killing of three Baloch leaders can only add to the deepening sense of alienation in that province. There is much that has to be addressed, and urgently, by way of equity and justice within and among the provinces. But a fired-up group of militants rapidly gaining momentum and traction combined with inaction on the part of our ruling elite is taking us towards disaster and not any closer to that crucial objective.

The government has made no real effort to educate people about the nature of the threat that confronts us. The electronic media is the most effective instrument for creating awareness to this end, at a popular level. The government could attempt this at least with the media it controls. But, for the most part, it is business as usual.

To add to our difficulties, the 'war on terror' origins of the conflict with its US imprimatur continue to confuse the issue even as our security personnel and law enforcement agencies are targeted, and scores of innocent people die almost every other week across the country as a result of suicide bombings and other terror attacks.

At the same time, India's increasing presence in Afghanistan reinforces the perception on the part of at least our security establishment that it remains our only real enemy and to the extent possible all defence-related efforts must remain focused towards that end.

But we need to be careful lest we lose the war that has already been thrust upon us even as our strategists focus on the one we may have to fight sometime in the future.

There is still no real coordination at the provincial and the federal level within the framework of an effective counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism strategy. There is no provision for rapidly processing intelligence from different sources and for coordinated response. Nor, yet, is there a specialised force that can respond effectively to this very different kind of war.

But even if all such measures were in place, a war of this kind cannot be fought without the support of the people — who will first need to comprehend just what is at stake.

**Postscript:** The Obama administration's promise of billions of dollars in development and military aid could help, but as importantly it needs to move ahead on its regional approach. At the same time, it should review its policy on drone attacks. These strikes may be partly successful in removing some key militant leaders but the killing of innocent people in the process cannot be condoned. It is, in any case, providing grist on a continuing basis to the propaganda mills of the Taliban and their supporters while deflecting attention from where it needs to be focused — our survival as an integrated society and state.

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