

Fighting the hordes

By Ayesha Siddiqa

Friday, 24 Apr, 2009 | 01:40 AM PST

DAWN.COM



We can fight the threat posed by the Taliban only if we muster the required will, develop a clear understanding of what lies ahead and then evolve a coherent strategy.— AP

THE outcry these days is that the Taliban are now firmly in our midst. While some believe they will eventually be defeated, others are of the view that the tide of Talibanisation will wipe out everything else.

There are two important questions here: one, are the Taliban a temporary phenomenon and, two, does society have the capacity to fight them off?

The Taliban's growing influence is no secret. The Taliban and their partners ensconced throughout the country have the capacity to weaken the state's authority in critical parts of Pakistani territory. We are already confronted with a situation where the Taliban have established control over areas where they wield influence. This expansion has taken place over several years in small increments. And all along many of us thought that this was a one-off problem that would eventually be resolved.

In the mid-1990s we had the Taliban state in Afghanistan, then the Sufi Mohammad episode which we tried to resolve by putting him in jail. In later years, it was the Red Mosque stand-off followed by the TNSM's resurgence in Swat along with a growing Taliban presence in other parts of the Frontier province. Now these staggered events seem to be connecting in the form of new gains for the Taliban and their numerous partners.

There are many good-hearted people who still believe that the Taliban can be defeated. Such assertions continue to be made even though our security forces have failed to gain the upper hand in Swat and other places. Call it a breach of intelligence or lack of capacity to fight an insurgency, the fact is that the state does not command the power to reclaim its territory. Unfortunately, it seems that the Taliban might win due to the combined capacity shortcomings of the security apparatus, the government and society at large.

It is clear that the political government is desperately short on the will to fight. The political actors are mired so deep in point-scoring that the primary objective has been lost. Our policymakers cannot deliberate on issues that will make or mar the Taliban's forward march. For instance, no strategic evaluation has been undertaken of the Taliban threat and its tactical dimensions. And this applies not just to the present government but also its predecessors. The Malakand agreement and the freeing of Maulana Abdul Aziz clearly indicate this lack of capacity.

Maulana Abdul Aziz was freed on bail even though he, according to his own claim, endangered the lives of hundreds of seminary students during the military's Red Mosque operation. The maulana's case, in fact, dates back to 2003-04 when he was charged with sedition for issuing a fatwa considered derogatory to the armed forces and was subsequently removed from his position. He was rescued by none other than a federal minister, Ejazul Haq.

The minister took upon himself the responsibility of mending fences between the maulana and the government. So it is not surprising that a strong case was not brought against him in court to keep him behind bars longer. For those dismayed by the court's recent decision, it would be worth noting that the judiciary has few options when the prosecution is unwilling to build a strong case.

This is not to say that the judiciary and the legal community stand absolved of responsibility. We have a judiciary that is famed for taking suo motu action. Shouldn't then there be a judicial inquiry into the sort of environment created by the maulana for his students? Even the students' interaction with their family members was reportedly controlled and supervised. Or what about challenging the Malakand agreement itself which is a travesty of the 1973 Constitution?

The judiciary must show more resolve than it did after the introduction of Zia's draconian Nizam-e-Islam regulations. Then, barring a few judges such as Justice Ramday, the majority happily applied laws that trampled on all norms of justice and human rights. And let's not forget that the legal community in general did not really resist Zia's laws. None of the bar councils protested against laws that ultimately resulted in an increase in homicide and injustice.

As the country confronts an expansion of the Taliban, the legal community seems unable to muster the courage to launch a movement against what has happened in Swat. It is surprising that some lawyers place a higher value on the restoration of judges than on questioning the Malakand agreement which poses a greater threat to the state.

The maulana's release sends a clear signal to men of his ilk fighting the state in Swat, Waziristan, Punjab and other places. This needs to be countered. We are in this fight together and the state envisioned by Jinnah — in which people of different castes, creeds, ethnicities and religious beliefs were to coexist — can survive only if we close ranks. Putting the blame on others and not doing our bit is not going to serve the cause. The head of state has to go beyond expecting other countries to fight his battles or capsizing to unknown pressures while signing controversial 'peace' deals with militants who refuse to lay down arms.

The Malakand agreement is the legal instrument that will result in the empowerment of the Taliban. These militants will not stop at Swat or even at Buner. They will not only expand their presence in the Frontier but will also move into other parts of the country. The tragedy of the present moment is that while the strength of political and human rights movements is fledgling at best, the Taliban and their 'jihadi' partners have increased their capacity to proliferate throughout Pakistan.

This is a time when everyone needs to stand up and not seek shelter in political expediency. As such, Mian Nawaz Sharif cannot hide behind his political deal with the PPP and support the Malakand agreement while at the same time talk about the threat posed by Talibanisation. We can fight this only if we muster the required will, develop a clear understanding of what lies ahead and then evolve a coherent implementation strategy.

The writer is an independent strategic and political analyst.

ayesha.ibd@gmail.com