

## Mayhem in Lahore: A Wake-Up Call for Pakistan

*The terrorist strike at Lahore on Easter Day provides some important lessons in the form of a fusion of civil and military objectives in Pakistan as well as an imperative for distancing between the authorities and the extremists, besides the need to reinforce regional anti-terror cooperation.*

Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury<sup>1</sup>

For some time now, a semblance of order seemed to have been restored in Pakistan, following the Army's lead-role in implementing the 'National Action Plan' (NAP), a forceful strategy for taking the bull of terrorism by its horn. Operation *Zarb-e-Azb* (named after a sword used by the Prophet of Islam himself in the battlefield) in North Waziristan, which was seen as a territory that angels would fear to tread, appeared to have stalled militant activity in Pakistan's most disreputably hostile regions. The Army chief, General Raheel Sharif's popularity had soared, and some assessed it to be higher than that of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (no kin, though not averse to sharing a kindred spirit with his formal subordinate) who showed the political shrewdness and sagacity to accept this oddity, even if it were for the sake of political expediency. A collaboration of sorts in counter-terrorism with arch-rival, India, was on the cards. Telephone calls between their senior functionaries had reportedly become routine.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at [isasiac@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasiac@nus.edu.sg). The author, not ISAS, is liable for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

Satisfied with these developments, the Chinese were happy to push the gigantic China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects which promised to pump in massive investments of over US\$ 46 billion to upgrade Pakistan's economy in general, and the infrastructure and energy sectors in particular. Assessing the situation to be appropriate for sending the kind of signals the government wanted, and also to be seen as carrying out normal legal actions, the government executed, in late February 2016, Mumtaz Qadri, the bodyguard who had assassinated the Punjab Governor Salman Taseer in 2011. Taseer had expressed his predilections in support of altering the country's blasphemy laws that at that time seemed to victimise a Christian woman in that overwhelmingly Muslim-majority nation. Qadri's execution rendered him an instant hero in a country where tolerance no longer appeared exciting. It triggered a series of violence that might have taken the government aback, though some, familiar with the backdrop, might wonder why. Extremist elements conducted attacks in Charsadda and Peshawar, in the Khyber Pukhtunkhwa province, for starters. Then they hit at Lahore, on Easter Day, at the Gulshan-i-Iqbal Park, where mostly Christians had collected to celebrate the holiday. Lahore is in many ways the heart of the nation. With this strike the detractors – the responsibility was quickly claimed by 'Jamaatul Ahrar', a splinter group of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan – dealt a blow to all those symbols of authority, and left a trail of casualties that included over 70 dead and 300 wounded (at writing). Most were children, since the bombs were detonated near a playground of swings. The fact that any group could admit to such horrific perpetration of criminality showed how much at least some Pakistanis had deviated from the idea and ideals on which that nation was founded.

For at his very first address to the Pakistan Constituent Assembly, three days before independence, on 11 August 1947, the founder of the new nation-State, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, had unequivocally indicated that Pakistan, while being a State for the Muslims of the South Asian subcontinent, was not to be an Islamist but a secular polity. In his words "...in course of time Hindus [in Pakistan] would cease to be Hindus, and Muslims cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense" but in the political sense as the citizens of the State". That speech seems to have been relegated to the unread pages of history, forgotten, not only by many of the masses but also unfortunately by those who have held the helm of power in that nation, and had chosen to deviate from that charted course of action for the sake of populism. General Zia-ul Haq's regime comes to mind, as does that of his antithesis, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto whose personal beliefs and life-style were not in accord with measures he adopted aimed at

wooing public sentiments, both having no qualms about using religion for gains for the moment but at a huge cost for the future.

Most nations recover from tragedies that befall them, as, quite likely, will Pakistan. But the moot question is when and how this might happen. Some steps are absolutely pre-requisite. First, the media reported that Mr Nawaz Sharif and Gen. Sharif held *separate* meetings with their aides. That might be so, indeed that would absolutely be in order, as the levels and personnel involved are different, but there must immediately be a *fusion* of the civil and military aims and purposes. Not only must it be so in substance, but it must also be seen to be so. In the past there have been bickering and turf wars between civil and military leaders with regard to the application of NAP. That must cease, and there must be a clearly structured hierarchy of power, with the elected Prime Minister in control and others following his lead. This is by no means denigrating the military in any way, for it would remain an apparatus of state, which must subject itself to a recognised ‘pecking-order’, to the benefit of both sides, and to the nation. For autonomy of the armed forces has obviously not worked, and nor is it likely to.

Second, there should never be any trafficking between authorities and the militants, strategically or tactically. Normally it would seem to be a given in the conduct of state policy, but unfortunately it is possible, even probable, that the lure of short-term benefits in Afghanistan or in the region might have at times led to a temporary coalescing of interests and therefore actions between authorities and extremist elements.

Third, counter-terrorism must be met head on as a South Asia-wide challenge. One silver lining in the dark cloud over Lahore was the phone call from the India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Mr Nawaz Sharif offering “deep condolences” and “underscoring the need for uncompromising efforts “to fight terror”. Already, reported cooperation is afoot on the investigations on the Pathankot incident, the January attack on the Indian military installation there, allegedly from some cross-border militants.

Just as the tragedies of Paris and Brussels have created a momentum for a ‘deeper Europe’ (of closer partnerships) so must this Lahore mayhem generate a wide sentiment for a ‘deeper South Asia’. The new linkages established between Pakistan and Iran through the visit of President Hassan Rouhani of Iran should also be used, to the extent possible, to effect more positive developments on Pakistan’s other sad conflict, the sectarian strife between the Shias and Sunnis

(for instance by utilising the services of clerics of both communities). Misguided ideals can wreak havoc. So might one recoil when faith is used as a call to violence, which results ultimately in violence to faith.

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