

Fighting the Enemy within

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It was international intervention in Afghanistan that unintendedly gave birth to a new brand of militants in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan.

These fighters, now called the Pakistani Taleban, were waging an armed struggle against foreign forces. Over time, however, they have turned inwards and paid their attention towards Pakistan.

They have vowed to establish a political and administrative domain with Islamist features similar to the Taleban regime in Afghanistan. They also want to make their domain available to other movements that share their Islamist agenda.

Initially, the anti-American cause to help liberate Afghanistan from foreign occupation provided the Pakistani Taleban with much-needed legitimacy among the local population. For many, the Pakistani Taleban represented a religious movement, one not hostile to Pakistan.

Despite their deadly attacks across the country, the media was reluctant to call them terrorists. There were expectations that they might transform into a socio-political movement like the Hizbollah in Lebanon. However, the tide has turned. The Pakistani Taleban have not been able to maintain public support essential to the launching of a mass movement. More Pakistanis and also the media are becoming critical of them. They are now regularly called terrorists.

It was a series of interrelated issues and events that changed public opinion. First, there were their own tactical and strategic blunders. With international help, Pakistan has been battling the Taleban on both operational and ideological fronts since early 2004. A comprehensive strategy has been implemented by the Pakistani government to eliminate them while addressing the material grievances of people residing in the Taleban areas.

Meanwhile, the Taleban have been resorting to beheadings and suicide bombings, which allowed mainstream religious scholars to attack the religious legitimacy of such tactics. Also, the shift in targets by their suicide bombers from security forces to the general public has turned supporters into angry opponents.

Initially, suicide attacks against the security forces were largely viewed as justified by many in society because the army and other law enforcement agencies were seen as mercenaries fighting a United States war on Pakistani soil.

That substantially changed when Islamist death squads started targeting public places, funerals and mosques. Even when the attacks were against 'legitimate' targets, the bombings caused considerable collateral damage.

Then there was the Benazir Bhutto assassination; attacks on the Sri Lankan cricket team and the Marriott Hotel; the flogging of a 16-year-old girl in Swat; and the killings of leading religious scholars like Maulana Hasan Jan and Mufti Sarfaraz Naeemi. The public began to see that they wanted nothing less than the capture of the whole of Pakistan to cloak it with their religious zealotry.

People have seen the savagery with which the Taleban have treated innocent Pakistanis. Between 2003 and 2008, the casualties in Taleban-related violence numbered more than 20,000 including civilians and security personnel. By contrast, in the 1965 war with India, there were 4,000 Pakistani casualties.

There is an emerging consensus in Pakistan that the internal threat the Taleban pose is far greater than any external threat. Moreover, unlike the Afghan Taleban, the Pakistani Taleban are not a monolithic entity. There are various groups nominally united under the Tehrik-i-Taleban Pakistan umbrella.

However, sectarian issues, geographic divisions, tribal politics and the fierce independence of the various factions suggest there is little chance of the Tehrik-i-Taleban Pakistan taking power.

The Pakistani Taleban have now lost the capacity to advance into an insurgent movement. From a movement, they have now become a terrorist group with declining public support in Pakistan.

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