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Democracy Under Threat in Pakistan?

Syed Adnan Ali Shah Bukhari*

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The recent attempted suicide attack on Benazir Bhutto highlights the threat posed by extremists in Pakistan. While public opinion regarding militancy and extremism remain divided across the entire spectrum of Pakistani society, this issue could become a decisive one in the upcoming general elections in early 2008. It could even determine the future course of Pakistan in the next five years.

THE OCTOBER 18 attempted suicide attack on Benazir Bhutto, a former prime minister and chairperson of Pakistan's largest political party, Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP), highlights the challenges posed to liberal democratic forces in the country. Bhutto is not the first politician to have received such threats in recent months. Asfandayar Wali Khan, the president of the Awami National Party (ANP), a secular Pushtun nationalist party opposed to the Taliban and militancy in Afghanistan and Pakistan, received similar threats in September 2007. A veteran politician of the ANP, Mr. Afzal Khan, was recently injured in an ambush by pro-Taliban militants in his hometown of Malakand Agency in September 2007.

A Handiwork of Al-Qaeda?

The terrorist attack on Bhutto is due to her unequivocal support to fighting terrorism and extremism in the country. As a result, these extremist forces view her as promoting US interests in the region.

The attack seems to be the handiwork of Al-Qaeda, which could have employed its affiliated local militant groups, like Jamiatul Furqan, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, or Harkatul Mujahideen. These groups have remained active in Karachi over the last decade, and were involved in terrorist attacks in the city, such as the kidnapping and eventual beheading of Wall Street Journal reporter, Daniel Pearl (February 2002); the killing of 11 French naval technicians in a vehicle borne suicide attack (May 2002); the vehicle borne suicide attack on the US Consulate in Karachi (June 2002); the ambush attack on Corps Commander Karachi (June 2004); the suicide attack on a Shia mosque (May 2005); and the suicide attack on a US diplomat (March 2006). These groups are allegedly receiving instructions from an Al-Qaeda leader, Abu Ali al-Tunisi, who is reportedly based in North Waziristan Agency (NWA). Although highly unlikely, Ms. Bhutto has also blamed elements with the Pakistani establishment, who she believes have alleged links with the Taliban militants and Al-Qaeda, to be behind the attack.

A prominent Taliban leader of South Waziristan Agency (SWA), Baitullah Mehsud, had also reportedly issued a threat to Ms. Bhutto in late September 2007, although he soon retracted his statement. While the involvement of the local Taliban militants could not be ruled out, this is remote, as they lack the experience in conducting any previous attacks in Karachi. Also Karachi is very far

away from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

Security and Elections 2008

The bleak security situation in Pakistan creates a lot of problems for the upcoming general elections scheduled for early 2008. An anti-elections campaign began in September 2007 in FATA and North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) – the Pushtun inhabited region of Pakistan. The campaign, which is being led by pro-Taliban militants, warns potential election candidates and political parties not to contest elections, unless they include some “basic principles” in their manifesto. These “basic principles” include strong opposition to the US and President Musharraf. There are also reports that the local Taliban militants would form anti-election committees in the area, which would strongly resist the traditional way of elections, and which would authorise the acceptance of political nominees for the elections. This would effectively mean barring some political parties, like PPP and ANP and their candidates from operating in the area.

While President Musharraf is best suited to undertake this arduous task of curbing extremism and militancy from the country, he needs the support of liberal democratic forces in the country. Barring PPP, none of the major secular political parties across the political spectrum of the Pakistani society, like Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q), and Tehrik-e-Insaaf have extended their support to President Musharraf in Pakistan’s fight against terrorism. They have maintained a stance of ambivalence and ambiguity vis-à-vis issues relating to violence and terrorism in FATA and NWFP. The religio-political parties, to the contrary, have strongly opposed Pakistan’s military operations in the tribal areas, and have tacitly supported Taliban militants through their vocal and physical actions. With the notable exception of the PML-N and ANP, most of the secular political parties have not even condemned the terrorist attack against Ms. Bhutto, which resulted in the death of 140 people and more than 500 injured.

Pakistan at the Crossroads

At this hour, Pakistan stands at a crossroad. The extremist forces led by the local Taliban militants based in FATA, and backed by religio-political parties, such as Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazalur Rehman (JUI-F) wants to implement their agenda of Islamising the country and imposing a rigid form of Shariah (Islamic) law based on the Afghan Taliban style. These Taliban elements have recently made inroads into the settled areas of NWFP, and have initiated an “anti-vice” drive in FATA and NWFP, which include attacks on CD and music shops, barber shops, tailor shops, mobile phone shops as well as girls’ schools. In the month of September 2007 alone, nearly 300 CD shops were attacked throughout NWFP. The purpose was to establish a parallel “Islamic government” in their strongholds by forcing the government machinery into submission through conducting attacks on security and law enforcement agencies.

This is precisely the reason that the Western world is banking much on President Musharraf to fight the extremist challenge in the country. The ostrich approach adopted by most of the political forces in Pakistan is not going to help the country drift away from extremism. There is a dire need to create awareness within Pakistani society regarding the threat within them. The political forces have a major responsibility to shoulder this arduous task. Isa Khan, a leading Taliban commander, clearly stated the organisation’s objectives on October 19, 2007, by saying: “It is not a matter of Taliban only, but an issue of the implementation of Islam and Shariah in the region. This struggle for the implementation of Shariah will continue and any hurdle in the process would not be tolerated.”

Talibanisation as a Decisive Factor

The terrorist attack on Ms Bhutto signifies that the coming general elections will not be easy and smooth. In a sign of the impact of the terrorist threat, the government is contemplating banning public

rallies by political parties during the election campaign on security grounds. The issue of being “pro-Taliban” or “anti-Taliban” will become an important election slogan for the upcoming general elections. With the Talibanisation drive launched by the Taliban militants slowly engulfing the entire western areas of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan, there is a need to mobilise the population to fight this threat. At the same time, this augurs the beginning of an extremist campaign against all those political parties and individuals who would take a firm position against such extremist elements. What is feared now is more bloodshed and violence in the coming months.

* *The author is an Associate Research Fellow and a doctoral candidate at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.*