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Pakistan

Religious fanatics groups: the fascists in the making

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It was the most deadly attack on any school by religious fanatics. 146 were killed in a Peshawar Army Public School, including 136 children, ages ranging from 10 to 17 years. They asked the children to recite Kalma and then fired at them. It was an attack on Muslim children by Muslim fanatics.

Tehreek Taliban Pakistan claimed responsibility and sent a group photo of the seven militants who took part in the "operation" holding guns and bombs. This was in response to the posting on-line of the dead faces of the seven who were killed by the army in the counter attack, not before they caused maximum damage.

The fanatics claimed that they do not kill little children. Their claim was that the children of the "enemy" aged less than 12 are not allowed to be killed by their "Islam". Almost 11 percent of the total children enrolled in the school were killed within 15 minutes of their occupation of the school.

The principal of the school was fired on to the extent that her body was not recognizable. Her fault: she guided children to escape from the school during the attack. Children were asked to line up and then were shot. Those who dared to run were chased and shot also.

Such was the devastating effect on children across Pakistan that my son aged 14 asked his mum what should he do in case they come to his school, "line up or run".

The day shocked Pakistan and the world. The news of the killing of the innocent children was flashed all over the world as the main story of the day. There was a great anger and shock.

A spontaneous general strike in all parts of Pakistan was observed on 17 December a day later, not called by any political party, a dream of all the parties of the rich that they could be in a position to shut Pakistan for their own narrow political interests. This was one of the most successful strikes with no transport on the roads and almost all shops and institutions were closed. This reminded us of the aftermath of Benazhir Bhutto's killing in December 2007, when all of Pakistan was shut in grief and anger.

A two minute silence in all the schools in India, a so-called arch rival, was observed, with the Indian parliament passing a resolution condemning the attack.

On the same day, heads of all the political parties represented in the parliament met in Peshawar for a useless day agreeing to "work together" with no mind-set change and no concrete proposal for dealing with fanatics. How could they?

In the meeting was Imran Khan whose party is in power in Khaiber Pukhtonkhawa, where the incident took place. He was too busy in campaigning for the overthrow of the federal government with his sit-ins and rallies in other parts of the country while totally ignoring the task of securing lives in the province.

Imran Khan's philosophy of "good and bad Taliban" meant that no action was taken against the fanatics who had built safe heavens in the tribal areas. He was a strong advocate of "talks with good Taliban" to divide the fanatics. There are no good or bad Taliban. They are all in the same family of neo-fascism.

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The ruling Muslim League had long term contacts with most of the religious fanatic groups and used them to win the 2013 general elections. Fanatics carried out suicide attacks on most of the opponents of PMLN and PTI, thus preventing them from running effective election campaigns.

Sitting in the meeting was Jamaat Islami, whose former head, declared dead Taliban as Shaheed (martyr) and army men killed by fanatics as dead. There was also Jamiat Ulemai Islam, the known political wing of one section of the religious fanatics. Also several other political parties who maintain regular contacts and links with religious extremists groups for their narrow political interests and subscribe to the same millenarian ideology of the Jihadists.

The meeting agreed to form a committee to formulate the security policy for the state within a week, as in one week they could come up with any magic formula.

The Pakistani state failed miserably to curb the rise of religious fundamentalism. There is always a soft spot for them. For a long time, they were encouraged by the state as a second line of security. The security paradigm meant an anti-India enmity was the core purpose of state patronage. The process of Islamisation was accelerated by military Dictator Zia Ul Haq with the full support of American imperialism.

Apart from creating and supporting Jihadist groups, for decades the state and military with the financial and political assistance of imperial powers, has indoctrinated millions with conservative Islamic ideology for the purpose of safeguarding its strategic interests.

The three decades since 1980 are seen as the years of madrassas, over 20,000 at present providing home ground for recruitment for suicidal attackers. Supported mainly by Saudi Arabia and many million Muslim immigrants, they have become the alternative to the regular school system. Most of the terrorist activities carried out in Pakistan and elsewhere are linked to the organizational and political support of these madrassas.

After 9/11, the state's close relationship with the fundamentalists has changed to some extent but not broken in real terms. The banned terrorist groups change their name and carry out activities on a regular basis. They hold meetings and public rallies, collect funds and publish their literature without any state intervention.

Pakistan has become more conservative, more Islamic and more right wing resulting in the growth of the extreme Islamist's ideas. Blasphemy laws are frequently used for settling personal and ideological scores. Religious minorities, women and children are the easy targets. These soft targets are paying the greatest price for this decisive right wing turn.

The rise of religious fundamentalism has emerged as the most serious challenge not only to progressive forces but also to the very foundation of a modern society. Education and health are the real targets of the fanatics.

Polio workers, mainly women, are killed by fanatics, on the assumption that a team working for the elimination of polio led to the discovery of Osama Bin Ladin, leading to his assassination. The net result is that the World Health Organization has recommended a ban on all Pakistanis traveling abroad without a polio vaccination certificate.

The primary and high school syllabus in Punjab and Khaiber Pukhonkhawa provinces are amended to give room to more unscientific and pro-Jihad ideas in the name of religion. Education in most schools has been littered with war-promoting philosophy.

Religious fanatics groups are the new version of fascism. They are fascists in the making. They have all the historic

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characteristics of fascism. They kill opponents en masse. They have found considerable space among the middle class, particularly educated ones. They are against trade unions and social movements. They are promoting women as inferior to men, and aim to keep them in the home. Attacking the religious minorities has become a norm.

The religious fanatic groups are internationalists. They want an Islamic world. They are against democracy and promote Khilafat (kingdom) as a way of governance. They are the most barbaric force recent history has seen in the shape of "Islamic State" and Taliban. There is nothing progressive in their ideology. They are not anti-imperialism but anti-America and anti-West. They have created and carried out the most barbaric terrorist activities in the shape of suicide attacks, bomb blasts, mass killings and indiscriminate shootings.

They must be countered. The American way of fighting back in shape of "war on terror" has failed miserably. Despite all the American initiatives of occupations, wars and creating democratic alternatives, the religious fundamentalists have grown with more force. Fundamentalists are stronger than they were at 9/11, despite the occupation of Afghanistan.

A whole package is needed. The state must break all links with fanatic's groups. The mindset that religious fundamentalists are "our own brothers, our own people, our security line and guarantee against "Hindus", some are bad and some are good" and so on must be changed. The conspiracy theories are most favorable arguments among the religious right wingers. They do not want to face the reality.

There is no short cut to end religious fundamentalism. There is no military solution. It has to be a political fight with dramatic reforms in education, health and working realities in most Muslim countries. Starting from nationalization of madrassas, it must go on to provide free education, health and transport as one of most effective means to counter fundamentalism.

Right wing ideas are promoting extreme right wing ideology. A mass working class alternative in the shape of trade unions and political parties linked with social movements is the most effective manner to counter religious fundamentalism.