

Pakistan: Chameleons

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The suicide blast in Peshawar on April 19 that claimed 23 lives was a little different, in the sense that instead of targeting the ANP, as usual, the suicide bomber chose a Jamaat-e-Islami demonstration to detonate himself.

The Naib Amir of the Jamaat, Sirajul Haq, was quick to blame the government that had failed to protect people's lives while another leader of the Jamaat, Hafiz Hashmat, accused Blackwater. Not a word was uttered by any of the Jamaat's leaders about the Taliban, who are usually blamed for such incidents. Last year, when the Swat videos shook the entire country, the Jamaat's did not condemn the Taliban.

Similarly, the PML-N is either devious when it comes to the Taliban, or subtly supportive of them. Shahbaz Sharif faced the wrath of the media when he said on March 14 that the PML-N had refused to accept dictation given by external forces. "If this is the stance of the Taliban, then they should not carry out terrorism in Punjab."

On the contrary, the PPP has been pretty vocal in condemning the Taliban. However, this was not the case back in 1996, when Kabul was captured by the Taliban, as the Jamaat termed it a US-sponsored plot to divide Afghanistan along ethnic and linguistic lines.

In May 1996, Qazi Husain Ahmad spent ten days shuttling between Gulbadin Hekmatyar and Ahmad Shah Masood in a last-ditch bid to stitch an alliance to fend off the Taliban. A month before the Hikmatyar-Masood government was routed in September 1996, the Jamaat had announced a decision to open its office in Kabul. Its aversion to Kabul's incoming masters owed to its long-standing support for Hekmatyar.

Meanwhile, Hekmatyar's support for Saddam Hussein had annoyed the Saudis. Perhaps Mansoor (the Jamaat's headquarters in Lahore) had not noticed this change in the Saudi mood. To further illustrate the Jamaat's troubled relationship with the Taliban, it is relevant to mention then-interior minister Naseerullah Babar's remark that the Taliban conquest of Kabul was "only a change of guard" from the Jamaat-e-Islami to the Jamiatul Ulama-e-Islam.

Nawaz Sharif was equally frustrated over the Taliban's victory. He termed Benazir Bhutto's Afghan policy a disaster which had "turned friends into enemies." However, in a few months' time, after he became prime minister in early 1997, his government was quick to recognise the Taliban government. The Taliban would find it hard to believe Shahbaz Sharif's claim that his party did not take any "external dictation."

To escape the Kargil imbroglio, Nawaz Sharif met Bill Clinton on July 4, 1999. Only Nawaz Sharif can tell if Clinton had dictated anything to him on the Taliban or not. On July 6, Washington imposed curbs on the Taliban. The US sanctions got an extra bite when, in mid-August, the Nawaz Sharif government announced restrictions on the Transit Trade Agreement. In early October, Nawaz Sharif travelled to Dubai to brief the Gulf states on his plan to withdraw support for the Taliban and push for Osama bin Laden's extradition. According to the Reuters report, "Sharif said he insisted that the Taliban stop all activities in Pakistan, hand over Osama bin Laden, or ask him to leave Afghanistan,

and shut down all training camps.”

Nawaz Sharif was ousted before he could persuade the Taliban to do this. Mullah Omar declared Sharif’s removal Pakistan’s internal matter, a move that came “in reaction to certain moves by foreign powers against the Pakistani nation.”

As for the PPP, Naseerullah Babar declared on the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul that “the rise of the Taliban is of great advantage to Pakistan. This is the first time there is a government which has no links with India, or anybody else.” And Benazir Bhutto, only 39 days away from her dismissal by Farooq Leghari, called it a “welcome development.”

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P.S.

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