

After Peshawar (Pakistan) and Paris (France) attacks: Challenge and response

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After the barbaric act by extremist militants against schoolchildren at the Army Public School in Peshawar and the attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine in Paris, the reaction and response by the respective governments and people of Pakistan and France were in the form of monotonic approaches. Cross-party national unity and adoption of a few stern laws was how both governments – Pakistani and French – responded to the attacks.

In Pakistan, opposing political parties had to sit together to rethink strategies for an effective response to the growing challenge posed by extremists. The net result was establishing military courts under a civilian government. In France, President Francois Hollande had no hesitation in sitting alongside Nicolas Sarkozy, head of right-wing UMP and the leader of far-right Front National Marine Le Pen on the pretext of cross-party unity at a time of extreme crisis. He even led a mass rally along with heads of state and known oppressors of freedom that he had opposed many times publically. The main response of the French president's roundtable meeting was to formulate new laws that were mainly to curb human rights – for fighting terror.

On the people's side, the reaction to these horrifying incidents was also unprecedented. France experienced something historic in the sheer strength and size of the demonstrations that took place on the weekend of January 10 and 11. In Pakistan, a spontaneous general strike by the people across the country was an immediate response. This was what the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf had been attempting for some months without success.

In France, whatever the confusion in the minds of the participants of the rallies, their reaction and behavior showed that the demonstrations were a tremendous expression of fraternal feeling. Participants chatted amongst themselves and helped one another move along amidst the crush of the masses of people that had gathered. Some scenes on January 10 and 11 brought back memories of the demonstrations of 1995 or even 1968, with solidarity as the dominant theme.

Within this fraternal outpouring, we should also note the presence of placards and symbols against all forms of racism – be it anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim racism. The millions of people in attendance were not expressing their support for the magazine's editorial line. They only sought to inject social and democratic content into the anger and sadness.

This is the groundswell from French society that has been expressed since January 7. These were not reactionary demonstrations. The dominant themes were not support for cross-party national unity or anti-democratic measures announced by the government. Society went into action spontaneously and with a great deal of confusion, but in a progressive direction all the same.

The French people took to the streets but not to support 'political operations' and manoeuvres. What they took away from the marches will not be the presence of a cordoned-off handful of blood-stained world leaders, but rather the involvement of millions of ordinary women and men. From the French

revolution of 1789-1799 until today, many ups and down have been witnessed in French society. However, the French people have a collective consciousness of fraternity and solidarity, enriched by centuries of experience.

The same is true of Pakistani society as a whole, on a different level and degree. Religious extremists generally had support of the state on a miscalculated approach of security paradigms. A distinction was made between good and bad Taliban by right-wing political parties and institutions of the state. December 16 changed it all.

Both incidents took place at a time when the French and Pakistani governments were highly unpopular and faced with unprecedented right-wing challenges, from the rise of the Front National of Marine Le Pen in France and Imran Khan's PTI in Pakistan. Mian Nawaz Sharif has cleverly used the occasion to emerge as the Pakistani leader ready to fight fundamentalism, and adjusted his previous 'military out of politics' position to bring them in as senior partners.

In France, will President Hollande manage to use this crisis to raise himself more or less above the fray of party politics and his own Socialist Party to come out on top in the 2017 presidential elections? In keeping with his cross-party national-unity operation, will he manage to pursue his austerity agenda, thereby worsening the socio-economic condition of millions of working people? Will he manage to contain the Right and Far Right, which have been marginalised by the events of recent days? All this is yet to be seen.

In France revolutionaries and progressive forces are leading the fight against Islamophobia and have the view that all racist acts must be denounced, the right of Muslims to practise their religion must be protected and mosques must be defended when they are attacked. In Pakistan, the 16/12 movement with a slogan of 'Never Forget Pakistan' was able to mobilise thousands in solidarity with the Peshawar martyrs a month after the incident. They intend to repeat it on the 16th of every month.

Avoiding a 'clash of barbarisms' between imperialist barbarism and that of organisations like the Islamic State (Isis) and Al-Qaeda is a must. Imperialist barbarism and its dictatorial supporters in situ oppress millions of people daily around the world. This is the fertile ground in which fundamentalist and terrorist organisations prosper. They feed off international interventions such as the ones led by the US and other western powers in Afghanistan, the Middle East and Iraq, and those regional powers. Often the growth of these fundamentalist organisations was initially funded and encouraged by Washington or by states such as ours. Now, however, they are pursuing their own policy and their own strategy of confrontation.

We must never forget one basic truth: the terrorist violence is directed first and foremost against people in Muslim countries. They attack all freedoms and all fundamental rights. They play a major counter-revolutionary role – against the progressive aspirations of the 'Arab spring', for example. They mete out levels of terror reminiscent of fascist movements in the 1930s.

These forces must be fought, at a time when they are carrying out an increasing number of barbaric acts. We must fight them not only in our countries, but also through international solidarity – by fighting against imperialist wars; supporting progressive movements, resisting fundamentalism and defending victims of intolerance wherever they may be.

Fundamentalism (of all religions) and the new Far Right (xenophobic and racist) are laying claim to the ideological ground of radicalism. We need a broad international anti-fascist and anti-fundamentalist resistance front, and also an activist Left capable of providing a radical alternative.

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P.S.

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