

Pakistan: Beyond the ban

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FOR more than four days, the PTI government remained mum in the face of pitched battles across Pakistan between activists of the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan and local police that erupted after TLP chief Saad Rizvi was arrested from Lahore. And then came the announcement by the interior minister that the organisation was to be proscribed.

The silver lining of two decades of the so-called ‘war on terror’, is that many commentators are questioning whether banning the TLP will actually make a difference. After all, groups like Sipah-i-Sahaba, Jamaatud Dawa and Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan continue to function under some guise or the other despite being outlawed at various junctures since 2001.

That formal bans do not translate into substantial dents in the armour of religious militancy is explained in part by the fact that our strategic planners have not abandoned the policy of weaponising religion for political ends. At various points since the geopolitical winds shifted in our region after 9/11, there has been compelling and decisive evidence to suggest that the establishment and its organic intellectuals will not give up old methods easily. The scorched-earth operations, military tribunals and other spectacular initiatives aside, selective patronage of religious militancy continues while state repression is reserved consistently for progressives.

But irrespective of the establishment’s strategic designs, there is an urgent need to interrogate the social bases of the now proscribed TLP, and of right-wing militancy more generally. We are a country of over 220 million people, most of whom are young. The rank and file of far-right militant groups remains mostly young boys and men, often those from the lower rungs of the social ladder. It is certainly naïve to pretend that proscribing an organisation equates to eliminating the causes of militancy.

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The imperative of thinking into the future is further heightened by US President Joe Biden’s announcement that all US troops will withdraw from neighbouring Afghanistan by Sept 11. By all accounts, the Afghan Taliban will be major power players in whatever dispensation is put in place, and there is no gainsaying the significant social impacts a Taliban-influenced regime will have on both sides of the border.

In effect, it is folly to believe that the state— ours as well as regional and global actors— is going to uphold the cause of peace any more today than it has in the past. If the politics of hate is to be combated within our society — and this applies also to Afghanistan, as well as Hindutva-battered India — we will have to address the deeper societal cleavages that make hateful ideologies such an easy sell to millions of young people.

Through the early years of the ‘war on terror’, the dominant narrative, often parroted by the liberal commentariat, was that religious militancy is rooted in Pakhtun regions. It was thus that urban middle-class support was cultivated for military operations and other punitive actions in ‘remote’ peripheries like Waziristan. But the TLP has put paid to the lazy notion that right-wing militancy is

particular to any ethnic group. Most of the dramatic violence that played out over the past week took place in small-town Punjab, as well as Sindh's urban centres.

While the TLP's rise to prominence took place rapidly due in large part to state leniency, the fact that it was able to mobilise such large numbers of youth in Punjab confirms that extremely conducive conditions were already in place. The ideological part of this story is well established; between the formal educational curricula, the popular media, and the infrastructure of the religious right, a largely unchallenged public discourse has taken root in which the weaponisation of religion, both home and abroad, has been largely celebrated.

The other part of this story reflects demographic and class dynamics that continue to be underemphasised in even critical accounts. If Pakistan is undergoing a youth bulge, then it follows that Punjab is home to a majority of this youthful population. Only a small percentage of this population is upwardly mobile. Most of the TLP cadres involved in the violent protests this past week hail from precisely that segment of youth that, even if it has aspirations for upward mobility, is imbued with an almost existential rage against the 'system'.

The TLP, like many other right-wing movements in Pakistan's recent history, may not have come into existence without the establishment's machinations. But it is far from an inorganic phenomenon that can be wished away by a ban. It is certainly important to hold this and all other previous regimes to account for how the present situation has come to pass. But the state will not forge progressive alternatives that appeal to young and disenfranchised people in Punjab and the peripheries. A critical mass to think and act beyond the ban is what we really need.

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