

Daily Times, Wednesday, December 30, 2009

[http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2009\12\30\story\\_30-12-2009\\_pg3\\_5](http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2009\12\30\story_30-12-2009_pg3_5)

**View: Pakistan 2009: in retrospect —Ishtiaq Ahmed**



*On March 3, 2009, the unthinkable happened in Lahore. Terrorists opened fire on the visiting Sri Lankan cricket team. Although some players sustained injuries, none was killed or maimed. Some on-duty police officials were killed. Such an attack had no typical justification*

So, after one day another year will be gone. 2009 will be remembered as the bloodiest since 1947, if we exclude what happened in the former East Pakistan in 1971 and if in 2010 we curb terrorism successfully and build peace. On March 3, 2009, the unthinkable happened in Lahore. Terrorists opened fire on the visiting Sri Lankan cricket team. Although some players sustained injuries, none was killed or maimed. Some on-duty police officials were killed. Such an attack had no typical justification — Sri Lanka had neither occupied Afghanistan nor Kashmir, and there was no record of Muslims being targeted by the Sri Lankan government.

On the contrary, the Tamil Tigers had a bad record of driving Muslims away from north and east Sri Lanka while the Sri Lankan government gave the Muslim refugees protection in Colombo and elsewhere on the island. Moreover, while the rest of the cricketing world turned its back on Pakistan, Sri Lanka and its brave cricketers stood by it. So, the usual “high moral ground” by which the terrorists justified their outrages did not apply to the Sri Lankan team or their country. The attack on March 3 was pure and unadulterated terrorism perpetrated by men who had been brainwashed to go and kill without let or hindrance. Or, perhaps there was after all a theological basis for such attacks: since nobody played cricket in 7th century Arabia, playing it constituted an unacceptable biddat (innovation)!

In any case, a few weeks later started the infamous brutalisation of the people of Swat Valley. As hundreds of thousands fled beastly Taliban rule creating another major wave of internal displacement, the authorities finally heard the wakeup call. Public opinion also began to turn against Taliban-al Qaeda terrorism. I attended a conference in Islamabad in May on radicalisation and anti-radicalisation. I realised that the variegated audience was agreed that something has to be done urgently to save Pakistan and its citizens. Mercifully, no nutty intellectual made the most unoriginal and bogus point that the terrorists of one man are the freedom fighters of another.

The Pakistan military realised that its policy of appeasing the Taliban through so-called peace accords (2007, 2008), which allowed them to apply Shariah in territories under their control in Swat, Malakand agency and so on in return for them accepting the writ of the Pakistani state that required them to disarm was leading nowhere; rather the Taliban were expanding their control in a direction that every day brought them closer to Islamabad.

An unsuccessful assassination attack took place on September 2 on Federal Minister for Religious Affairs, Hamid Saeed Kazmi. The immediate reason for the attack was that Mr Kazmi (not a Shia but a Barelvi Sunni) had arranged a meeting of such ulema and mashaikh who condemned terrorism and issued a fatwa against it. I met the minister during the May conference in Islamabad and found him to be a gentle and soft-spoken individual. He told me that Barelvi mosques were being taken over in not only the NWFP but also in Punjab, including Islamabad, by pro-Taliban maulvis, but the government felt helpless.

In any event, military operations, Rah-e-Haq (Righteous Path) followed by Rah-e-Nijat (Path to Deliverance), did prove to be highly successful and created panic among the Taliban-al Qaeda forces.

They retaliated with killings of women and children, old and infirm, while especially targeting military personnel, premises and installations. The month of October proved to be singularly destructive of innocent lives. The military operations continue, and it is premature to claim that the tide has turned decisively against the terrorists.

Recent history shows that when governments patronise extremism and militancy they end up paying a very heavy price for such ventures. Indira Gandhi paid with her life for taking under her wings Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale; the Americans nurtured Osama bin Laden as a great jihadist and out of it came 9/11. Pakistan has paid the heaviest price by promoting different types of extremists — Afghanistan-specific, Kashmir-specific and what not. Means and ends cannot be divorced with impunity. That is the iron law of human behaviour.

The year 2009 has been disastrous for Pakistan in economic terms as well. The financial situation worsened dangerously, unemployment rates rose sharply and international financial institutions had to be approached with pleas for help to prevent economic collapse. Right-wing parties and media channels and populist intellectuals instead turned their guns upon the Kerry-Lugar Bill because of its supposed intrusion on Pakistani sovereignty.

However, 2009 was not an unmitigated disaster. Pakistan's fledgling democracy survived another year of challenges and threats. Another point of encouragement was that the judiciary did not forgo its duty to uphold the rule of law. By declaring the so-called National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) ultra vires it proved that it is an institution one can again start taking pride in. It is most important that charges of abuse of office and corruption are properly investigated. How far back in time should the long hand of the law extend is something on which our superior judiciary has to take a decision.

It is absolutely important that all those who hold public office voluntarily agree to go through the judicial process to have their names cleared of the charges levelled against them. However, each individual should be treated as innocent till proven guilty. Therefore, the revocation of the NRO does not mean that the accused were guilty. That needs to be proved in a court of law. The most difficult question is whether the presidential immunity prescribed by the Constitution is absolute or it is conditional. There are both legal as well as moral questions involved when it refers to the post of president.

Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani has been given a clean chit, so there are politicians in the PPP who do not carry the stigma of alleged corruption. Such individuals can continue in office and provide continuity and stability while others are properly investigated. Last but not least: in spite of the rumour mills churning out conspiracy theories of an imminent military coup in the offing, Chief of Army Staff General Kayani has acted with responsibility and foresight. Pakistan is better off as a civilian polity with an efficient and upright military ready to defend it against external aggression.

*Ishtiaq Ahmed is a Visiting Research Professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) and the South Asian Studies Programme at the National University of Singapore. He is also a Professor of Political Science at Stockholm University. He has published extensively on South Asian politics. At ISAS, he is currently working on a book, *Is Pakistan a Garrison State?* He can be reached at [isasia@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasia@nus.edu.sg).*