

Weekend Read | Edition 50

Changing Perceptions with Change in Regimes:

Terrorism on Spotlight

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If we go in the past history of terrorism, it is interesting that even after 9/11 which collapsed the super power US, it didn't affect Pakistan until 2001 when Gen Pervez Musharraf committed to the war on terror.

Gallup's survey '38 Years of Polling on Crimes, Violences, Terrorism & Social Evils (1980-2018)' 56% people thought that Musharraf was responsible for terrorism and extremism in Pakistan. Grippingly, in 2016 the same survey after the 5 years departure 27% of the populace thought him to be responsible. This is where the ailment of terrorism began with Musharraf bending to each and every demand of the US. He not only aided militants to fight in Kashmir while also being involved in the war on terror, in cahoots with the superpower United States of America and its allies, which led to a pushback from militant groups such as Al-Qaeda, Taliban and its offshoots with himself personally dodging assassination attempts. His regime was the beginning of a flurry of terrorist activities that exist up to date.

This weekend read will utilize Gallup's survey '38 Years of Polling on Crimes, Violences, Terrorism & Social Evils (1980-2018)' with a focus on terrorism as the subject of analysis to compare how with change in regimes, people's perceptions change and how that change takes place. The two regimes being primarily referred to are Asif Ali Zardari's from 2008-2013 and Nawaz Sharif's from 2013-2017. This was also the first time in the history of Pakistan that a government had completed its full five-year electoral term (2008-2013).

The Gallup survey shows that during Nawaz Sharif's government from 2013-2017 people thought there was a general decline in terrorism compared to Asif Ali Zardari's (2008-2013) but this is also based in facts. If comparative data is to be quoted when asked will terrorism increase or decrease in the coming days in the country, 2016 national survey demonstrates that 53% people believed it will decrease while 12% felt it would increase for 2016. For 2013, data shows that populace were of the opinion that terrorism will increase by 72% and 20% believed it will reduce by 16%. This is a marked difference from 2016 data polling.

In 2008, the country witnessed 2,148 terrorist attacks, causing 2,267 casualties with 4,558 being injured. Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) in its annual report indicated that there were at least 67 suicide attacks across Pakistan killing 973 people and injuring 2,318. Furthermore, a source in the investigation agencies disclosed that the total number of suicide blasts in Pakistan since 2002 rose to 140 (till 21 December 2008).

2009 was the worst of any for terrorism. It was during Asif Ali Zardari's government with, 2,586 terrorist, insurgent and sectarian-related incidents being reported, 3,021 people being killed and 7,334 injured, according to the 'Pakistan Security Report 2009' published by PIPS. Most of the attacks took place in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa where TTP considered Zardari and his PPP, a liberal party which they were staunchly against. Zardari also didn't partake in any serious negotiations with Taliban and its offshoots.

Moreover, the casualties mentioned above figure 48% higher as compared to 2008. On the other hand, the rate of suicide attacks saw an upsurge by one third to 87 bombings that killed 1,300 people and injured. On 8 August 2013, a suicide attacker exploded a bomb at a funeral being held for a police officer in Quetta and killed as many as thirty-seven people and injured over fifty people. No group has taken responsibility for the bombing, but it is believed that the Taliban were behind the bombing and many more such incidents were carried out in the year 2013.

When comparing with terrorist activities in 2016 specifically, on 16 March 2016, bomb detonated in a bus carrying government employees in Peshawar, killing 15 and injuring at least 30. The explosion occurred on Sunehri Masjid Road. The bomb had been hidden on the bus, and was apparently detonated remotely. A group aligned with the Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility for the bombing. On 27 March 2016, on Easter Sunday, at least 75 people were killed (29 fatalities being children), and over 340 were injured, in a suicide bombing that hit the main entrance of Gulshan-e-Iqbal Park, one of the largest parks in Lahore. The attack targeted Christians who were celebrating Easter. The majority of the victims were women and children. Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, a group affiliated with the Pakistani Taliban, claimed responsibility for the attack.

On 24 October 2016, three heavily armed terrorists carried out a police training college in Quetta, killing 61 cadets and injuring more than 165 others. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province claimed responsibility for the attack, and Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Jhangvi claimed to have collaborated with them. According to Pakistani authorities, the assailants came from Afghanistan and were in contact with their handlers there while perpetrating the attack amongst many other terrorism-related incidents.

While analyzing the above mentioned statistics from Gallup data and terrorist activities, the most pertinent reason for people favoring terrorism decline in 2016 could be improved relations between Prime Minister Modi and Nawaz Sharif.

They were close to the extent that the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif visited India for Modi's prime ministerial inaugural ceremony and Modi in return, crossing all diplomatic barriers, reached Lahore to attend Nawaz Sharif's grand daughter's wedding ceremony with pleasantries.

In the same survey, when a question was posed who was the most responsible for terrorist activities, the verdict was Indian agencies. People thought Indian agencies played the highest role both in 2009 and 2016. According to ISI, Pakistani state and political pundits, Indian agencies have been involved in terrorism in Pakistan in one way or the other, therefore, if the relations improved between India and Pakistan during Nawaz Sharif's government people saw it as a sign of decline in terrorism in the present and the future. This hope for decrease in terrorism manifested in answers to questions posed about the future of terrorism in Pakistan. In 2009, 14% people thought that the chances are a lot for reduce in terrorism, 36% stated somewhat and 27% quipped there are no chances. While in 2016, 29% of the population felt that the chances are up to 29%. People believed the chances to be free of terrorism were somewhat 47% and 37% said not at all.

In retrospect, Zardari's government was plagued with terrorism bearing residues of Musharraf's policies towards militancy and he was unable to devise a robust and sustainable anti-terrorism policy as opposed to Nawaz Sharif. Moreover, in 2014 Operation Zarb-e-Azb took place by the Pakistani military against various militant groups TTP being on top of the list. It was launched in North Waziristan along Pakistan-Afghanistan border as a renewed effort against militancy after the Jinnah International Airport Karachi attack. This was yet again during Nawaz Sharif's regime. After the operation the remnants of Taliban were not powerful enough and decimated or displaced to a large extent. Moreover, in 2014, after Army Public School attack in Peshawar that killed 141 children reports were circulating widely in televised news media about law enforcement agencies tracking down the militants and targeting TTP operatives in a series of police encounters taking place all over the country. After the school attack, Pakistani intelligence agencies chased down and apprehended TTP terrorists.

In 6 January 2015, both houses of the Parliament of Pakistan unanimously passed the 'Constitution (Twenty-First Amendment) Act 2015', which was signed into law by the President on 7 January 2015. The Amendment provided a constitutional cover to the military courts that were established in the country for speedy trials of

those involved in the attack. Therefore, Sharif's government was swiftly handling the terrorism plague.

When contrasting Nawaz Sharif government's negotiations efforts with Asif Zardari, in Sharif's government a four-member peace committee was formed. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif announced that he has made a four-member committee for negotiations with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The members of the committee are veteran journalists Irfan Siddiqui and Rahimullah Yusufzai, former ambassador Rustam Shah Mehmmand and former ISI official Major (retired) Amir. The premier added that terrorism and peace talks cannot happen at the same time, further stating that instances of violence will not be tolerated any more. Special Assistant to the Prime Minister Irfan Siddiqui said the first mandate of the Peace Committee would be to establish contacts with Taliban for dialogue. Addressing a news conference in Islamabad, he said the contact numbers of the committee would be publicized and the other side would be encouraged to contact its members too. He said the committee would determine the next course of action after contacts had been established and a response received. He said it would be appreciable if the other side also nominated a committee or some individual for contact and dialogue.

Another initiative started was the National Action Plan but whose implementation has been abysmal. It was a 20 points agenda for countering terrorism and extremism was chalked out by NACTA/ Ministry of Interior in consultation with the stakeholders and approved on 24th of December, 2014 by the Parliament.

Therefore, when Gallup investigated whether on the whole, has the government been successful in controlling terrorism in the country, in 2016 26% stated a lot, 62% stated somewhat and 12% said not at all. In 2009, 9% quipped quite a lot, 51% stated quite a lot and a vast percentage of 40% said not at all. This was during Asif Ali Zardari era.

The facts and figures along with Gallup data in our course of discussion displayed that the change in regimes has led to a change in perceptions for myriad reasons with respect to terrorism in this case.

To conclude, for eliminating terrorism a well-defined objective and longer-term timetable and planning is required instead of short-term, short-sighted optics-driven tactics. Governance would be strengthened with better coordination and collaboration between civil institutions and the military and greater willingness by the military to bring civilians into their military campaign planning processes and

to train and assist civil institutions (particularly the police force) in growing into their roles and responsibilities would bolster security. The central government should establish a clearer vision and a process for decision making related to antiterrorism and anti-militancy efforts; devote more resources to its security institutions; and better organize its relationships with individual provinces. Moreover, Parliament should play a more active role in defining and measuring the success of efforts to counter terrorism and militancy. Any government that comes to power must consider negotiations with militant groups only if they are filling to fulfill the governments and the state's demands.

Terrorism has engulfed Pakistan for more than two decades; it is about time the populace is ensured relief from this malice.



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