

# More of the same?

Pak National  
Security

By Murtaza Razvi

THIS is what democracy is all about, it can well be argued. A vote in parliament and the president signing a controversial regulation to enforce the Sharia justice system in Malakand Division. But there remain dangerous repercussions following the move.

It also came as a litmus test for the secular credentials of many of the mainstream parties which had bagged the popular vote in last year's election. The way the resolution was passed, with the PML-N and PML-Q also supporting it alongside the coalition government — with the exception of the MQM — in a rare show of unity of purpose is frightening to say the least. It betrays signs of gullibility and naiveté in equal measure on the part of the parties concerned when it comes to using Islam for ulterior motives.

One must say this because the gun-wielding, power-hungry, semi-literate Taliban stand for the most medieval, intolerant and regressive interpretation of the faith, which they use to consolidate their stranglehold on a people who would not elect them. If enforcement of the Sharia is the only noble cause for the Taliban, what are Mullah Fazlullah's men doing illegally taking over Swat's state-owned emerald mines and holding weekly auctions to sell off the precious stones? This is theft and thuggery, plain and simple. Would any qazi court established under the Nizam-i-Adl regulations dare bring them to book and restore the government's control over the valley's most precious natural resource?

As for the legality of the Nizam-i-Adl regulations, it may well be within the ambit of the law as far as Malakand is concerned; provincially administered tribal areas only require the president to sign a new law without even running it through parliament. However, capitulation before militancy comes in where it concerns the settled areas of Swat. And that's what makes and keeps the deal controversial despite its passage by parliament.

Moreover, the falling in effect of the neighbouring Buner district to the still very militant Taliban should be a real cause of concern for the ANP-led Frontier government. The assumption that if certain backwater districts are made over to the Taliban the militants will let the provincial government reign unhindered in the more mainstream areas of the provinces must be doubted.

The truth is that as Buner goes down — as Swat did before it — the brutalised, silent majority cried out for help, only to find that the government they had voted into office had abandoned them to their tormentors. The people had given the ANP and the PPP a mandate to rule, not the Taliban, nor indeed their more mainstream cousins, the religious parties.

However, the Pakhtun nationalist ANP's dilemma must also be understood. It was clearly in a fix before it reached out to the Taliban in utter desperation. It felt the army was either not willing or capable of taking decisive action against the Taliban; this was not without justification. If the largely ineffective military action in Swat continued, the political government would surely keep getting flak for it as the Taliban were 'allowed' to retaliate with full force, and the civilian casualties mounted.

The ANP itself lost some of its leaders and party workers as the Taliban targeted and killed them. Thus, it was the half-hearted military action that the ANP saw as the real irritant, which only resulted in Pakhtun blood being shed either way. This obviously was not acceptable to the nationalist party. But here again the potentially very dangerous assumption is that the Taliban will stop at Malakand Division. What about the rest of the tribal areas and even the settled districts, where the Taliban have been more than flexing their muscles?

Despite Monday's majority vote in parliament, Pakistan as a nation remains sorely divided along religious, pseudo-religious, regional and ethnic lines. This also has to do with the political parties' gullibility to the misuse of religion. The MQM walked out of the vote not so much because it could be seen as the only truly secular party, but because of the ethnic mix in its power base in urban Sindh, where it must stop Islamist and the smaller ethnic parties combine from posing a challenge to its political supremacy.

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Again, with the arguable exception of the MQM, the vote also showed an increasing gap between the political parties' exigencies and what their voters want from them. The two factions of the Muslim League were likely to go along with anything that involved religion; for many they are just another excuse for Islamist parties. The ANP had its own reasons based on misread exigencies in all likelihood, and the pertinence of the argument that it should stay in power, howsoever curtailed. The PPP acquiesced because it did not want any more fissures in the ruling coalition.

The shame of it all is that the Taliban, a euphemism for militancy as a means to grab power and establish an intolerant order, should emerge victorious from the whole sordid deal. This does not augur well either for the people of Pakistan or for the country's foreign policy objectives. In the final analysis, it's more of the same. The elected government remains under the shadow of the 'strategic' minds perpetually at work at the GHQ, creating conditions that leave the government with fewer choices; and history has shown us what disasters that has led to. ■