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Militants in Pakistan Military: Signs of Danger

By Sajjad Ashraf

Synopsis

The increasing radicalisation of the Pakistani Armed Forces mirrors the growing militancy in the country. Demanding action from a fractured military and society would lead to greater chaos.

Commentary

THE RECENT detention of a Pakistan army brigadier and four majors for links to the banned extremist organisation Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT) has raised fears of the extent of militant infiltration of the armed forces.

While radicalisation of the lower ranks of the Pakistani army has been known for some years, this first arrest at such a senior level raises the spectre of institutional militancy within the military. Indeed Simon Valentine, a British researcher who has studied extremism in the Pakistani military, claims that "militant Islam, including the HuT, has much support from the grass roots to the highest level within all branches of the armed forces".

Military image under siege

The news has dealt another blow to the image of Pakistan's military, already reeling from several misfortunes including the US raid in Abbotabad, the commando attack on Mehran Naval Base, now known to be an insider's job, when two PC 3 Orions were destroyed. Similarly the 2009 attack on the Army Headquarter in Rawalpindi had also been carried out with inside help.

Hassan Abbas, author of "Pakistan's Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army and America's War on Terror," has pointed out an alarming trend that included Pakistani pilots refusing to bomb militant strongholds, and units surrendering to militant groups rather than fire on them. In a Wikileaks cable a Pakistani Air Vice-Marshal acknowledged in 2006 that extremism was rampant in the lower ranking officers of the country's air force and they were even sabotaging F-16s deployed for security operations along the Afghan border.

Root of Radicalisation

Radicalisation within the ranks of Pakistan's armed forces is an issue of major concern, mirroring the growing militancy within the country following General Musharaff's decision to support the US policies in Afghanistan.

This strong religious fervour, particularly in the army, was introduced by General Zia-ul-Haq, the military ruler whose need for international legitimacy fitted well with the United States strategy of bleeding the Soviet Union in

Afghanistan during the final decade of the Cold War. However the Pakistani military and the weak political leadership always sought refuge in arousing religious sentiments for chauvinistic purposes.

The Pakistan army's motto, changed by General Zia, now reads: "imaan, taqwa, jihad fi sabillillah" (meaning faith, piety and Jihad in the name of Allah). The motto enjoins the Muslims to fight those who are considered enemies of Islam. That is drilled into them everyday. And that all occupiers of Islamic countries are enemies of Islam.

The Wikileaks cables have only confirmed the widely-held belief that the Pakistani ruling establishment is working for the US agenda, which people are convinced is against Pakistan's and Islamic interests. Therefore, Jihad becomes a legitimate instrument against the US and all that it represents. It is worrying that in Friday sermons, even in the fashionable suburban mosques in Islamabad, the believers are goaded to fight the Americans and those who support them.

The nexus between mosque, money and power, carefully nurtured, though initially for Jihad against the Soviets, works well for those in power. The mosque gets young boys mostly before the age of 10 from less privileged homes and grooms them for Jihad in defence of Islam. That gels well with the military's practice of picking semi-literate young men of 18 or so from the village and training them for Jihad against the enemies of Islam. Perhaps that was the only ground sufficient to arouse hatred against India to prepare the army for eventual conflict. The unimagined consequences of this folly can be seen in today's military.

Jihadi Creed

In any presentation from the Pakistan Army the preparation for defence is framed as being against threats to the faith and not just the Islamic republic. It reflects the fear that anything less than the call for Jihad is not likely to arouse the believers to defend the country against adversaries. Hence, this has become part of the creed of the Pakistani military.

Against the backdrop of this indoctrination and its visible effects the Pakistan Army leadership's dithering against extreme US pressure to launch a military operation in North Waziristan is understandable. With jihad fi-sabillillah as a part of the creed it is natural that there will be fissures in the ranks of the military if the rulers are seen to be pursuing policies against Islamic brethren. This contradiction is coming to the fore increasingly in the shape of detentions and defections within the ranks.

It is a no-win situation for the US. Its attempts at regime change and bringing in a new order in a tribal society like Afghanistan has destabilised the whole region. Its demand for action from Pakistan's rulers is not supported by the man in the street. Demanding action from an already fractured military and society will lead to a much greater chaos and instability in the region. Pakistan needs to take charge of itself. It needs to change its security doctrine to create a comfortable space for its own socio-economic development.

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