

Owning our Institutions

By: Ayesha Ijaz Khan

There is a time to criticize the government. And then there is a time to stand firmly behind it. This principle is well-entrenched in most long-standing democracies, but is something that we in Pakistan seem to be struggling with. Although the present government may have several flaws in terms of governance issues and corruption scandals, it is nevertheless a legitimately elected government, and not one that has made its way to power on the force of a gun.

I am stunned therefore when I hear some Pakistanis claim that the politicians and the establishment are “corrupt to the core and have a vested financial interest in earning American dollars for continuing a war in Pakistan”. It is true that our politicians and our establishment have much to answer for in terms of tax evasion, lack of focus on basic healthcare and education, as well as faulty policies of supporting jihadi groups in a quest for strategic depth, that have all contributed in leading us to the present-day mess. But, it must also be acknowledged that, in the current situation, the civil-military elite that is often rightly blamed for many of Pakistan’s woes is on the receiving end of the terrorist’s wrath just as much as the average person is.

Benazir Bhutto lost her life to the terrorists just like the citizens shopping at Moon Market in Lahore. Countless ANP politicians have succumbed to the violence of these same militants, just as the ordinary Peshawar resident has faced attacks in places least expected. Senior officers of our military as well as their families have come under brutal fire at the Parade Lane Mosque, as our foot soldiers valiantly embrace shahadat on the battlefield. Given the ever-increasing number of loved ones lost by civilian politicians as well as army personnel, it is not only highly irresponsible to cast aspersions on the motivation or sincerity of the government and military to fight this war, but also gives space to terrorists who would like nothing more than mistrust to flourish between the various arms of state and its people.

The only way to combat this terrible menace that confronts us as a society, a menace that has no regard for our basic values—that does not care for the sanctity of a mosque or the sanctuary of a school—is through unity. And unity is only possible if we do not thrive on suspicion and ill-conceived conspiracy theories. What is desperately needed instead, and is absolutely essential to defeat the terrorists in their objectives, is the utmost cooperation between the government and the military, the government and the people as well as the military and the people.

Having spoken recently to an army officer who returned from battling the militants in Mohmand Agency, which resulted in clearing most of the area from the hold of the terrorists, he acknowledged that a key factor in the success was the support of the local people. But, he told me, that it was very difficult to get that support because the locals were not convinced that the military was serious in its fight against the militants. “For a long time, they observed us,” he told me, “but when they were convinced that we were serious in the fight and taking losses of our own, they supported us and took on great risks to themselves in helping apprehend Moulvi Omar, the spokesperson for the TTP.”

Similarly, it is absolutely crucial that we respect and cooperate with the civilian law enforcement arm of our state. More than one policeman in Peshawar has taken on suicide bombers such that his body takes the brunt of the force and other residents are protected. The government must ensure that such patriotic martyrs and their families are looked after in the best way possible. The superb job done by the District Police Officer, Dr. Usman in Sargodha, is yet another brilliant example of how law enforcement and the community at large can cooperate in helping apprehend terrorists and preventing further attacks. Our focus at this point in time should not be on theorizing about Musharraf’s follies of days long gone or being caught up in a utopia of talking to people who have declared Pakistan a “dar ul harb” and refuse not only to pray in its mosques but consider most of us worthy of murder. Instead, Pakistan’s civil society should be forming neighbourhood watch groups, calling for SOS help lines, monitoring suspicious activity in bazaars and on the internet.

Recently I examined a timeline of terrorist activity in Pakistan from 2001 until present. What quickly became apparent was the pattern of violence. Initially, attacks concentrated on the Christian community, when few of us paid heed. This was followed by attacks on Shia Imambargahs. Next, influential community members, who could have curbed terrorist activity by mobilizing public opinion, were taken out. This was followed by attacks on politicians who spoke out against terrorism and army officers fighting against it. And now, no Pakistani is safe. A trip to the bazaar or a prayer in a mosque could well end up being a fatal activity.

It is clear therefore that the perpetrators of this violence are a group of people whose ideology remains vehemently exclusionary. Starting off with Christians and then Shias, they now consider the rest of Pakistan equally devoid of belief. And although it is possible that the historic enemies of the Pakistani state may not be averse to helping these groups out, that is certainly not the root cause of the problem. The root cause, and one that we should be exclusively focusing on, is much closer to home. For those who ask: how can Muslims kill Muslims? All I have to say is: are you not familiar with our history? The Khariji movement claimed the lives of several noble Muslims and came from within the Muslim community, long before America or India or Israel existed as countries. Nor is this internal strife exclusive to Muslims, for Christians too have fought amongst each other. France and England, both Christian nations, fought for a hundred years.

The fact that the Americans may be willing to talk to the Taliban in Afghanistan is a good sign because peace in Afghanistan can only be a harbinger for better times in Pakistan, but it is not a good enough reason for us to talk to the TTP. Not only can a group that takes arms against the state not be tolerated, but also the agreement on this among most sane Pakistanis both in and out of government underscores the fact that Pakistan's war is not the same as America's war. We are in this region for keeps. America can pick up and leave, just like it did at the end of the Soviet-Afghan war. We have a vested interest in how things take shape in our country and thus in defeating an ideology that is bent upon carving out communal differences and keeping half our population illiterate.

Our government must continue to oppose the drone attacks planned for Baluchistan because it is not in our interest to open another front in this war, but Pakistanis must also stop doubting the government's intentions. We must own our institutions, for flawed as they may be, they are undoubtedly better than the anarchy the Taliban represent. But the government and military too must be mindful. It is far easier to win the trust of the people if some sacrifice is made and greed avoided. A good example is that of the Supreme Court, which has successfully won the trust of most of the country due to the sacrifice undertaken by key members of the judiciary. Similarly, the military must demonstrate to the people that it will submit to civilian decisions in foreign policy and will not seek to influence domestic politics in clandestine ways. And, the civilian government must seriously deliver with the mandate it has been given. It must cut down its own expenses and luxuries and start focusing on increasing the tax net and giving back to the people who put it in office. In the words of the learned Dr. Mubashar Hassan, it must "reconstruct or perish". For the sake of my country, I sincerely hope it reconstructs. The alternative is too painful to imagine.

The writer is a London-based lawyer turned political analyst. Website: www.ayeshajazkhan.com