

## Battle for the soul of Pakistan

Are we as a nation, not at war with militancy and Islamic extremism? If we are, then the military alone will not be able to fight and win this war. The battles of this war will be fought by our military, along with the allied security forces but the war will eventually be fought and won by the liberal democratic government representing the popular support and will of the people and the future they want and desire for this country.

Militants have turned their guns towards the military and the state because they are convinced that the military has betrayed their jihad. All the jihadist networks that were facilitated by military rulers in the past to fight proxy battles in Afghanistan and Kashmir find it difficult to operate and survive in the changing ideological climate of the country, which now resents extremism and violence as instruments of state policy. When General Pervez Musharraf agreed to assist the US to fight the war on terror, he knew the negative fallouts of militancy and extremism. Still, instead of standing up against them along with his military, he continued with the policy of the state backing the militant groups and thus, endured and proliferated extremism and intolerance in our society. The biggest fault of General (ret'd) Musharraf was his inability to introduce a culture of democracy and accountability in society. The extremely polarised society in which we live today, divided on ethnic, religious and sectarian lines, is the gift of generals like Ziaul Haq and Musharraf. The former created the likes of the Taliban and the latter used them to prolong his stay in power. The religious identity that both these generals tried to impose on our society failed to galvanise the people and only eroded state cohesion.

Our first test as a society today is to move away from the orthodox legacy of religion that the military rulers have imposed on us. For the state, survival does not only mean securing geographical borders; it also means redrawing and reconstructing our ideological boundaries. The military will have to lead the way and when it launches operations to root out militants, the soldiers of Pakistan must fight to win against these self-proclaimed soldiers of Islam.

Today, the loyalties are clearly defined. Mullahs have turned against a military that is not ready to support their ideology and the military led by General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani is supporting liberal democracy – demonstrating neutrality by its disengagement from indulging in political activities/affairs of the state that it indulged in the past – for the first time. Institutional protection stands out as the most immediate occupation for a military leadership that is concerned with putting its own house in order before it proceeds to take on the militant forces through military operations.

It is my belief that this country will not disintegrate because its politicians, no matter how corrupt they may be, still remain the elected representatives of the people of Pakistan and are far better than the military dictators, whose promotion and support of Islamic militancy has put at risk the political, social and cultural stability of this country.

The lesson that the military seemed to have learnt is that the scope of its execution of proxy wars and its consequences extends to all areas of national security, including public and societal security. The dark shadows that fighting these proxy wars has cast are not limited to institutional but societal degradation.

For Pakistan to progress as a self-respecting nation, the idea of a Pakistan for tomorrow will have to be based on a different ideological orientation. Either we choose to allow the Taliban to dictate their terms to us or we fight and reject their ideology.

In other words, we have a choice between raising our hands to either garland Mumtaz Qadri or raising them to pray for the health and well-being of Malala Yousufzai and the likes of her. We cannot and must not raise our hands to do both. It is time for Pakistanis to make a choice and pick a side in the battle for the soul of Pakistan.

By Muhammad Ali Ehsan

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