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Swat – Litmus Test for Government’s Writ

In Swat, Taliban call the shots: Pakistan’s mountainous and picturesque Swat Region in the northwest continues to seethe in violence. Famed as "Pakistan’s Switzerland" for its meadows, majestic mountain peaks, lakes and the ski resort at Malam Jabba, the Swat region is now home to terror. At the heart of the turmoil lies the Tehreeke Taliban Pakistan (TTP) led by the Wahabist Maulana Fazlullah, who is a deputy to the TTP supreme Baitullah Mehsud. While Mehsud and his associates lord over vast swathes of territories in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Maulana Fazlullah projects the TTP power in the settled Swat district, where the state writ has shrunk from a 5337square kilometers area to the limits of its regional headquarters of Mingora — a city of 36 square kilometers.¹

Socio-political fallout: TTP militants have frequently used “executions and beheadings” of government officials, alleged spies, criminals and political opponents as a means to sow terror in the hearts and minds of locals – and have succeeded. Taliban militants treat security officials – both police and para-military and the army – as the enemy number one and don't spare them at all. During the last two months of 2008 militants executed about 15 women after accusing them of involvement in “un-Islamic and immoral practices,” recalled Professor Noorullah. Prostitution aside, the militants abhor even singing and dancing as against Islamic injunctions.

Locals say these militants not only control certain vintage points but also use district headquarter Mingora’s central square - the Green Chowk – to project their power, and also demonstrate their contempt for anything and anybody they do not like. During December 2008, for instance,

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militants dumped 27 bodies in the square, warning they not be removed before 11 am. On January 6, residents woke up to yet another site of five bodies of executed security officials.

Several criminals – those found involved in robberies, extortions, kidnappings – also met with death, pronounced by the Taliban courts. No surprise, the inter-section is now called “Zibakhkhana

the backdrop of reports that between Jan 2007, when Maulana Fazlullah's men surfaced in Swat with a bang, and by Jan 2009, some 164 schools, over 142 of them for girls, had fallen victim to their frenzy in Swat.

Chowk,” the slaughter square. Also, no surprise, though worrisome, that at least 800 policemen – half of the Swat police, have either deserted or absented themselves from duty on one pretext or the other. More alarming is the refusal of almost all 600 police recruits, all specially trained by the military, to be deployed in Swat. Only one volunteered to serve in Swat, while all others plainly refused.

Another worrisome development is the retreat of popular leadership from public life; as many as 8 members of the National and Provincial Legislatures from Swat, all elected in February a year ago, are practically living either in Peshawar, the provincial capital, or Islamabad, the federal capital. A veteran Pashtoon nationalist leader in Swat, Afzal Khan, has borne most of the brunt, as TTP militants have repeatedly attacked his home and other properties in the Swat region, where a house of Asfandyar Wali Khan, the head of the Awami National Party (ANP) was also blown up mid January. Khan himself had survived a deadly suicide attack in October at his home town Charsada. Most of the MPs eschew public appearances and also avoid TV talk shows for fear of reprisals by the militants.

Taliban vs. females of Swat: A TTP decreed ban on girls’ education (above grade five) has thrown the future of at least 80,000 female students and the careers of about 8,000 female teachers of almost 400 schools in jeopardy. This decree, that had set the Jan 15 deadline for closing girls’ schools above grade five, came to the backdrop of reports that between Jan 2007, when Maulana Fazlullah's men surfaced in Swat with a bang, and by Jan 2009, some 164 schools, over 142 of them for girls, had fallen victim to their frenzy in Swat. On November 25, a local child rights’ worker, who was also the member of the District Council, was dragged out of her home in Mulakabad area of Mingora, beaten up and shot dead point blank on. Her fault: she criticized the Taliban for preventing girls from attending school. Taliban's local radio also warned other civil society activists and cited the end of Zeba as an example. Ironically, as the Tehreeke Taliban Pakistan (TTP) led by the Wahabist cleric Maulana Fazlullah continued its charge on girls' schools in Swat, a provincial government official told a conference at Peshawar on Jan 5, 2008, that as many as 2.2 million children were currently out of school and the Frontier Province needs to build at least 22,000 new schools by 2012 to ensure their enrollment.

¹ Daily Dawn Jan 15, 2009

Economic fallout: During 2008, Swat remained under curfew for almost eleven months because of the Taliban-Military stand-off, rendering tens of thousands of people out of work. As many as 400 hotels are currently closed, while the remaining few have turned into haunted houses, some even taken over by the militants. Unabated violence, frequent curfews, restricted movement of people and goods have brought Swat's economy to a grinding halt, causing a "silent migration." About half a million people have been forced to move out for safer homes and job and business opportunities.

Security challenges: Buoyed by the victory of the liberal ANP in the general elections in February 2008, and pressed to rehabilitate the image of the army that had suffered due to almost nine year long rule of General Pervez Musharraf, the new army chief, General Ashfaq Kayani, had thrown his weight behind a peace deal that the ANP-led provincial government signed with sections of the militants on May 21, 2008. The Peshawar Corps of the army was asked to facilitate the peace process to the possible extent. But, as it turned out, the militants seemed more interested in the release of their prisoners than the return of peace in Swat. So, under a nod from Baitullah Mehsud in late August, the Taliban walked out of the deal, thereby jeopardizing the peace process again and sucking the military again into the conflict. The relentless militancy – with the people at large terrorized, political leadership scared into the back seat, the civilian administration in disarray, and the police force half decimated – has now transformed into a full-fledged insurgency and the situation in Swat looks dismal, very dismal. It also represents an uphill challenge for the Pakistani military, which had joined the para-military forces in September 2008 to regain control of the territories lost to the TTP and reestablish the government writ. The military operation thus launched has yielded little so far.

Military cannot do it alone: But the major question arising out of the current scenario is whether the armed forces on their own can reverse the tide. Can they really succeed in the absence of a vacuum caused by the retreat of politicians, paralysis of the civilian administration, clearly accentuated by the desertions and inaction of a truncated police force, seized with its own security, rather than taking on the challenge?

The challenge, it looks quite obvious, is too formidable for the armed forces alone. They will succeed only when the political leadership and the civil society also pick up courage to lead the people and first contain and then defeat the monster of militancy. Only a united effort by all segments of the society – the civilians as well as the military – can create the ownership for a movement that is vital for the very survival of the state and its institutions.