

Talibanising Pakistan's Paradise

In his last days America's most hated president George W Bush was trying to make a secret deal with the Taliban to have some respite for his beleaguered NATO forces in Afghanistan. And his successor Obama has no option but to continue the process of reconciliation, possibly with more secrecy, in view of the growing political and military strength of Taliban. With Islamabad's elected government virtually giving up hope to run its writ in Pakistani Taliban-controlled Swat valley otherwise known as Switzerland of Pakistan and allowing Sharia law to prevail for the region, ostensibly to buy peace and create a division among Taliban and Al Qaeda ranks, Talibanisation of Pakistan's polity will have a further boost.

The followers of Maulana Fazalullah, a hardcore Taliban leader has succeeded in making the troubled Swat a state within a state. Maulana is reported to have established his own administration on the pattern of Saudi monarchs and created a private army, equipped with latest weapons and controlled by his loyal and trusted commanders. Though everybody is talking about the surge in Taliban activities but nobody is serious about the source of Taliban's sophisticated weapons. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, America was the supplier. Many think in the changed context Chinese weapons find their way to Taliban through the Saudi route. After all Saudi Wahhabi ideology which Taliban activists propagate is built on the concept of political enforcement of religious beliefs, thus permitting no differences in faith whatsoever. In Wahhabi belief, faith is not necessarily an option, it is sometimes mandated by force.

But 1.5 million inhabitants of Swat are in cross-fire. Besides banning female education in Swat valley, the Taliban militants are said to have torched or completely destroyed more than 165 girls and boys schools and colleges thereby stopping students from taking their annual examinations.

Around 40,000 people connected with the valley's hotel industry, the most thriving industry of the locality, are currently unemployed, as are thousands of others who are indirectly linked to the industry. The picturesque Swat valley once enchanted tourists from around the world. No more.

The Pakistani Taliban have, of late, stoked fear in the valley and their control is expanding. They have demobilised schools and bombed bridges, political workers are assassinated, journalists are torched, girls are forbidden from going to school. One can guess the extent of barbarism the militants resort to from the fact that even dead bodies have been exhumed from their graves and put on gallows. For all practical purposes Pakistan government's power has shrunk to limited area in the valley. Hence the Zardaris and Gilanis are trying to seek a 'permanent ceasefire' and appease the hardliners by accepting Sharia law for the region.

In all likelihood America's Afghan campaign is going to suffer a serious setback if Pakistan-Afghanistan border region remains under Taliban control because insurgency in most cases succeeds when insurgents get an ideal rear. In many ways Afghanistan today resembles what it was during the fading moments of Nazibullah rule. Only the actors are different with different roles as Americans have replaced the Soviets.

Pakistan being a theocratic state the Zardaris cannot do much when militants exploit the laws in the name of religion. But the creeping Talibanisation of Pakistan's 'Paradise Valley'—Swat—may have repercussions far beyond Pakistan's border and India cannot avoid the pitfalls. □