

PAKISTAN

## Extremism Precedes Terrorism

[The life of Dr Ayesha Siddiqa, Pakistan's top defence analyst and author of *Military Inc: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*, came under threat after she recently published a cover story in *Newsline* exposing the extremist organisation *Jaish-e-Mohammad*. Excerpts from an exclusive interview with Shahid Husain]

How do you feel after publication of such threatening material?

Encouraged! This is a form of engagement. What is threatening is propaganda.

Encouraged because you have hit the target?

I believe that these people need to face the reality.

What makes you so brave when people in Pakistan prefer to seek asylum on the slightest pretext? You are equally threatened by the Establishment and religious extremists.

I didn't write that Masood Azhar had French tiles in his toilet. I never wrote it. But that is not the point. The more important point is he has resources and no accountability.

What makes you so brave in an otherwise opportunistic society?

See the thing is that Masood Azhar's family used to live in three marla (225 sq yards) house and now they have property worth crores. Has anyone asked where the money came from?

None of these outfits has any accountability. The other important point is that these outfits present a certain religious discourse, and it is important to provide an alternative. The third thing is that what precedes terrorism is extremism. The two are deeply connected.

Just how are they deeply connected?

As I told you earlier I am not courageous but think that some things have to be done. My only act of courage is that I am willing to initiate an alternative religious discourse in the country.

What can be the alternative?

We have to begin an alternative dialogue and the liberal educated have to participate in this religious discourse.

Were you ever threatened by the Establishment?

Well, banning the launch of my book is a threat.

True. Were you ever directly harassed?

They sent a message but it was really to throw me out of the country.

When? When your book was published?

Yes.

Don't you think that the Establishment might be behind the vicious campaign against you?

Well I am sure the Establishment is not happy with the suggestion that *Jaish* is an agent of the (intelligence) agencies.

Why are you so hopeful that the educated liberal sections in Pakistan will come forward?

I am not saying that I am hopeful, but I want to try.

OK! But don't you feel lonely? Here there are only a few people to challenge extremists.

That is true. Listen, if we don't try this out we will lose.

Very true! But it's a long battle.

It is.

So there should be a sort of loose united front to fight the menace?

If we want this country to survive we will have to strategise in a different way.

Could you please elaborate?

Until now we think in terms of western liberalism and religiosity. Our educated youth don't touch religion.

You mean there is a need to attack and expose religiosity?

This has to change. The liberal educated have to engage in religious discourse.

How do you view the current military operation in South Waziristan? Is it authentic?

Based on the information they have, they are proceeding in the right direction. But it is a very complex war.

What are the chances of success?

My argument is that the war cannot be fought successfully unless all enemies are eliminated.

Very true! But how can we eliminate all enemies? It will require decades.

We have to re-consider our strategy. That old nonsense of strategic depth, I mean...

So what should be done?

They have to understand that the military is part of the programme. This is most important. □□□