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## A new wave of extremism in Pakistan?

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Unfortunately known more for Islamist extremists and radicalization phenomena rather than for the beauty of its landscapes and its population's generosity, Pakistan was hit once more by a murderous terrorist attack, killing 76. The suicide bombing that took place on Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> of March in the Gulsane-Iqbal Park of Lahore was committed by the *Jamaat-ul-Ahrar*, a faction of the *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan*.

On the same day, Islamabad's twin city, Rawalpindi, was paralyzed by a demonstration in support of Mumtaz Qadri, hung at the beginning of March 2016 for the murder of former Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer (back in 2011). The demonstration spread to Islamabad and marched towards the parliament where protesters held their grounds (now for the third day, as of the time of writing).

For starters, let us look back at the suicide bombing in Lahore. Since Maulana Fazlullah's rise at the head of the *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan* (TTP, Pakistanis Taliban) (November 2013), factions within its structure that did not recognize him as their leader split from its central node. Other dynamics, such as ISIL's surge, have contributed to the defection of some, who left the TPP

claiming ideological divergences. With the emergence of these dissident groups, a number of analysts expected a growth in terror attacks. The latter could come from the TTP's central node, as a way to reassert itself on the Pakistani scene, or/and the dissident groups, with the goal in mind to "make a hit" – thus asserting themselves through the country. One has to bear in mind that these groups operate through their high visibility within media and via the societal impacts of their actions. The *Jamaat-ul-Ahrar* was a part of the TTP until September 2014. During the same month, Omar Khalid Khorasani accused the TTP's leadership of not respecting the group's original ideology. And thus the *Jamaat-ul-Ahrar* was born. Nevertheless, the newly independent group rejoined the TTP in March 2015. Like any other factions forming the TPP, the *Jamaat-ul-Ahrar* has national goals, claiming a strict application of Sharia law in Pakistan. Therefore, it is based on this ideology and the subsequent will to unsettle the government that the group committed the attack of the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 2016, an Easter Sunday. The designated targets? Pakistani Christians.

Can one thus assume that Pakistan tolerates little, or not at all, its minorities? Despite a negative image

conveyed in our societies, a board majority of the Pakistani population is tolerant and open. The country being of Sunni majority, it is, of course, organized around Sunni Islam. In general, other religions are neither rejected nor oppressed by the population. Nonetheless, the presence of extremist groups makes gatherings dangerous, as much for Christians as for Shia Muslims or other religions within the country. There is thus a danger for minorities, yet this danger does not come from the population's rejection.

Let us now dwell shorting on the demonstration that took place on Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> of March, in Rawalpindi, which extended to Islamabad later on. This gathering, still ongoing as of the time of writing, overall has two objectives: the application of a strict Sharia Law (the definition of which has been left for consideration), and the elevation of Qadri to the status of martyr. The Pakistani government, wishing to avoid any spillovers and/or terror attacks, blocked all access to the cellular network of the city, thus depriving the population of Islamabad from one of its main medium of communication. A necessity, granted, which exemplifies the complexity of the situation Pakistan is facing. On the evening of the 29<sup>th</sup> of March, the

Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan used the threat of a repression and liberation of the occupied area “at any cost” by Wednesday, if the protestors did not scatter in the night of Tuesday to Wednesday. Status quo is ongoing this Wednesday morning and the demonstration is spreading to other cities.

What do these two, apparently not related, events mean? First of all, Pakistan is still prey to a ubiquitous extremism phenomenon. Despite a strong and proactive army, the relatively weak and poorly efficient response provided by the government to this radicalization dynamic illustrates the complexity of the phenomenon. In spite of the ongoing military action in North-Waziristan (Zarb-e-Asb operation), it is difficult to find an all-suiting answer to all these movements. In the end, the problem with the operationalization of a strategy against extremist groups lies within the problem of radicalization. Common to several countries, the radicalization phenomenon takes its roots in the difficulty of access to public or private education (poorer classes tending towards the religious educative system), economic troubles and a feeling of injustice felt by a part of the population. To these must be added, in numerous cases, the claim for a strict Sharia Law, a religious claim. In a nutshell, in order to get rid of (a part of) radicalism, employment and economic opportunities must be given to the population. Despite the efficacy of its armed forces, Pakistan’s fight against terrorism is not merely a question of military strategy: the endgame must be to attack the roots of the problem. Without such an objective, the solution will be as useful as putting a sticking plaster on an open wound.

Nevertheless it would be an oversimplification to only have this image of Pakistan in our mind. A vast majority of the population is open, tolerant, and friendly. Although the foreign policy of the country is constrained to deal with this situation, it would be appropriate to focus on

efforts to give a positive image of a country rich in natural and human resources. One has to remember that the Pakistani nation, taken hostage by extremism, is its first victim.