

PEACE AGREEMENT IN WAZIRISTAN NEW BEGINNING OR A FALSE DAWN?

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“...we are happy that a new beginning starts today.”

Maulana Nek Zaman, MNA
after signing the peace agreement in Miranshah, September 2006

In the first week of August 2006, the administration in North Waziristan signed a peace agreement with local Taliban militants. A committee, comprising of ten members, belonging to tribal elders, clerics and the local administration, was also set up to ensure the implementation of this agreement. The long process began with the local militants declaring a month long ceasefire in June 2006, which was extended in July. The administration responded by releasing some arrested militants. More importantly, in July, the administration formed a grand jirga, comprising of 45 members from all major tribes in the FATA, which initiated a process of reconciliation with the militants. Undoubtedly, the credit goes to Lt Gen (retd) Ali Muhammad Jan Orakzai, the Governor of the NWFP. Ever since his appointment in May 2006, the much respected Governor insisted on a political approach.

Is this ‘peace agreement’ a breakthrough? Is it sustainable? Would it reduce the spread of Taliban’s influence in the tribal

agencies, ultimately result in peace returning to Waziristan? Would it complement the War on Terror being fought in Afghanistan?

This is not the first time that the administration has reached an understanding with the local militants. Since the beginning of military operations in Waziristan in 2002, there has been an unwritten deal in 2004 and a written one in 2005. By the first deal, concluded in Shakai in South Waziristan, the militants led by Nek Mohammad agreed to live peacefully and not use Pakistani soil against any other country. Hailed as a breakthrough, the deal however failed and Nek was subsequently killed. The second deal, a written agreement between the Mahsuds and the administration, was signed in February 2005. The militants again agreed not to attack military and administrative targets. This agreement never took off as Abdullah Mahsud, another local militant leader disowned it and violence persisted.

Would the current ‘peace agreement’ succeed, when the previous two have failed? There are significant

similarities and dissimilarities between the present and the earlier two agreements. According to the present agreement, the militants have agreed not to attack the security forces of the State and its properties; restrain from running parallel administration; not to carry out target killings; and departure of all foreigners in North Waziristan. The administration, on its part, has agreed to release those

arrested during military operations; restore the privileges and benefits of the tribal leaders; remove all new check posts established; and remove the ban on display of arms. Is this agreement a new beginning, as proclaimed by Maulana Nek Zaman? Overcoming of certain serious problems and challenges is important for the success of this agreement.

I

WILL THE FOREIGNERS LEAVE?

The first major problem is with the presence of foreigners, not only in North Waziristan, but all over the FATA. The deals of 2004 and 2005 failed precisely over this issue. After the first deal, in April 2004, the political administration succeeded neither in registering the foreigners in Waziristan nor evacuating them. Most of the foreigners belong to Chechenya and the Central Asian republics, especially Uzbekistan. There are also Arabs and Afghans. These foreigners arrived in different phases since the 1980s and settled in various parts of the FATA. The first batch came during the Afghan jihad and they still continue coming. Earlier they fought along the lines drawn by the CIA and the ISI and now they fight on Taliban and al Qaeda dictates. Many of them have settled in the FATA and inter-married with the local population..

This section is unlikely to leave and is a potential hindrance to the success of current agreement. The foreigners are not only uprooted from their countries of origin, but some of them are also facing prosecution back home. Besides the establishment of family relations, most of the foreigners are respected by

the local community and the tribal custom would not permit to push them out by force. The government, on its part, bungled on this issue, by including a proviso in the present agreement, to the provision that the foreigners should leave. It also says that those foreigners, who have genuine reasons to stay back, could do so, as long as they respect the laws and regulations of Pakistan. Given the local support and anti-American feeling, peaceful settlement of these foreigners, without resisting the American-led forces in Afghanistan, is highly improbable. Every foreigner, except the Afghan-pashtun content of the Taliban, is likely to stay back and continue their fight. A section, especially the Uzbek fighters, has already expressed their disagreement with the present process. It is probable that Pakistan will hoodwink the international community by asserting that after the peace agreement the foreigners have either left or are staying peacefully in its tribal areas and that the conflict in Afghanistan is indigenous and has no Pakistan support.

II

IS THE CROSS BORDER MOVEMENT LIKELY TO STOP? WILL THE WAR ON TERROR GET A FILLIP?

The second major problem would emanate from the inability of both Afghan and Pakistan governments to effectively seal the border between them. The Durand line is one of the most porous borders in the region, with illegal movement of people and goods. Due to the high levels of corruption, strength of drugs, arms and illegal goods mafia and impudence to the concept of border among the local tribal communities, the Durand line can never be sealed effectively. The present agreement's aim of preventing cross border movement is highly ambitious and assumes that the international community would believe such an effort. Even inside Pakistan, there would be few supporters for such a notion of the Durand line.

Given this reality, the administration's decision to withdraw the check posts, it had created at the beginning of military operations, is likely to backfire. While the government has been contemplating border fencing and increasing the number of troops

along the Durand line, it is doubtful whether removing these military posts would complement such a process. This move is also likely to increase the tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Though General Musharraf highlighted this agreement as a success during his meeting with Hamid Karzai in September 2006, it is not sure whether the Afghan leaders share his enthusiasm. The Afghan leadership, starting from the President, has been continuously complaining about Pakistan not doing enough to stop the Taliban menace and accused it of harboring Taliban fighters thereby playing a double game.

With the foreigners unlikely to leave the FATA region and the persistence of cross border movement, this agreement will not boost the War on Terror, being waged by the American-led troops in Afghanistan. The US government so far has been guarded in its response to the peace agreement.

III

WILL THE WRIT OF THE STATE RUN?

The third major problem of the deal would stem from the administration's efforts to establish the writ of the state as mentioned in the peace agreement. According to the agreement, there would be no target killing and no parallel administration in the Agency. At the outset, it is essential to understand that the federal government's writ in the FATA has always remained limited. In the recent

years, it was further challenged by the increasing involvement of the local Taliban in running a parallel administration. It was admitted by Aftab Ahmad Khan Sherpao, the interior minister of Pakistan himself in April 2006, when he mentioned that the Taliban forces are openly challenging the writ of government in North and South Waziristan and had killed 150 pro-government tribesmen

in North and South Waziristan Agencies.

In the last two years, the local Taliban has been systematically challenging the local administration and imposing its own codes. There were attempts to impose religious customs over tribal traditions; pro-government elders were systematically targeted and eliminated; and punishments were awarded in typical Taliban style by beheading and hanging.

Is the above situation expected to change? Unlikely, since the peace agreement includes an important clause: for reasons unfathomable, the administration decided to lift the ban on display of weapons, though with a proviso that the locals should not carry 'heavy' weapons. As a part of the agreement, the administration also handed over 24 AK-47s to the militants, which were captured during the military operations, clearly hinting

that those weapons are acceptable to the State. If AK-47 is not a heavy weapon, what else is? How could any State enforce its writ, if it allows its people to carry such weapons? More than that, these weapons would be used by the local militants to continue with target killing and enforce their version of local administration and justice. According to news reports published in the Pakistani press, the local Taliban have been patrolling the main towns even after the June ceasefire. There were incidents of target killing, suicide bombing and rocket attacks in the last two months. They cannot be ignored as being carried out by vested interests, who do not want peace to prevail in Waziristan. Handing over the weapons, removal of the ban on their display and establishing the writ of the State cannot take place simultaneously.

CONCLUSIONS

The government of Pakistan has conceded more than it has gained out of this agreement. Why then did the administration go ahead? Was Jan Orakzai, the Governor of NWFP, not aware of these limitations? What is the peace agreement likely to achieve?

Sustaining the ceasefire process and reaching an internal peace, however untenable it could be, seems to be the primary reason behind the agreement. Serious efforts were made to sustain the ceasefire since its establishment in June 2006. In the process, it appears that, for short-term gains the government of Pakistan has overlooked the wider long term strategic calculations.

The second objective of the agreement seems to be winning the hearts and minds of the locals by avoiding internal military operations. The latter has made Pakistan and the security forces unpopular among the local tribal population. Stopping of military operations, removal of check posts, release of local tribesmen, reimbursement for damages and restoring tribal privileges – all aspects of the agreement were aimed at fulfilling this objective.

To conclude, the agreement is unlikely to restore the writ of the State and is only likely to increase the influence of local Taliban. It is evident that the State is willing to let Talibanization in FATA to achieve larger political objectives. Perhaps, the calculation is

that a radical FATA under the influence of Taliban is a lesser threat than a political FATA with extreme Pashtun consciousness and anti-Pakistan sentiments. The agreement will not prevent cross border terrorism, as the foreigners are likely to remain and the locals would continue to support them.

Taliban and its local supporters in Waziristan are the clear winners in this agreement; Pakistan, perhaps only in the short run. Neither Afghanistan nor the US is likely to gain any benefits from this agreement. Both the War on Terror led by the US and the War of Terror led by Taliban and al Qaeda will continue, perhaps with greater intensity.