Military Operation Continues as Taliban’s Sympathizers Dwindle in Numbers

On April 13, 2009, all political parties, barring the Karachi based Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), voted for the parliamentary resolution calling upon the President of Pakistan to approve the proposed Nizam-e-Adal Regulations (NAR) 2009. On the same day, President Zardari accorded approval for the implementations of NAR in the seven districts of the NWFP [1]. The seven districts are Swat, Malakand, Upper and Lower Dir, Shangla, Buner and Kohistan (Fig 1).

The enactment of NAR 2009 was followed by a public debate. Politicians, the media and civil society presented arguments in favour and against on the agreement through speeches, writings and in the cyberspace. The pro-NAR people argued that the ultimatum solution to militancy in the Swat region lies in the implementation of Shariah Laws - a long standing demand of the Tehreek-Nifaz-e-Shariah- Muhammadi (TNSM) (Movement for the Implementation of Islamic Laws). They argued that since its inception in 1989, TNSM, has been vying and at times, agitating for the enforcement of the Islamic laws with some public support [2, 3]. They further argued that citizens are susceptible to extreme views when they are deprived of their right to make their own choices. Even parts of the Swati population, reminiscent of its erstwhile speedy judicial system when Swat was a princely state, and suffering from the collateral damage of the military operation, were supportive of the provincial government’s February 2009 peace deal with the founder of the TNSM, Sufi Muhammad.[2, 4, 5]. The offer by the TNSM leader to persuade the militants to lay arms in return for the implementation of Islamic laws was accepted by the provincial government and Taliban agreed to renounce militancy on the condition that Islamic laws will be adopted [6].
Post Nizam-e-Adal Regulations Scenario in Swat Region

The connotation of Sharia or Islamic Laws may be misleading but in essence, the Nizam-e-Adal regulation (NAR) 2009, accepted by TNSM as an embodiment of Sharia laws is reported to be in line with the constitution of Pakistan. The existing lower courts are to be replaced in Swat region by courts, headed by Qazis, who would be judicial officers under the administrative control of the Peshawar High Court. The Regulation also empowers the executive magistrates to perform judicial functions putting them under the administrative control of District Magistrate or Zila Qazi. Qazis are required to seek guidance from Quran and Sunnah for the purposes of procedure and proceedings of conduct, resolution and decision of cases. There is also a provision that the cases pertaining to the minority sects are to be dealt in line with their interpretation of Quran and Sunnah. The Qazi is also time bound to give decisions after listening to the arguments of the defendants and plaintiff. The decisions can be challenged in the superior judiciary [7, 8]. The over all aim is to provide speedy justice at minimum cost to common man. Swatis along with the rest of the countrymen hoped that with the fulfilment of their core demand of Shariah implementation, militants would disarm and peace will be restored in the region. However, militants had other ideas.

District Buner lies in the south east of the Swat region and its people had foiled Swat militant’s previous attempts to enter their area. In-fact, there were armed clashes between the local tribesmen and Taliban militants [9]. On Aug 13 2008, Militants suffered heavy casualties and had to retreat to their strong holds in the central Swat district of the Swat region [10, 11]. On 28 Dec 2008, a suicide bomber blew himself at a polling station in Buner and killed dozen of innocent people casting their votes. Swat Taliban claimed the responsibility and termed it as a revenge for their earlier bloody retreat [12]. Militants were bound to lay down their arms under the peace accord as NAR 2009 was in the process of implementation. However, the militants not only maintained their arms but also tried to extend their influence over adjoining areas like Buner. On 6th April 2009, hundreds of militants entered Buner. The local tribesmen along with policemen resisted and casualties were reported on both the sides. However, this time around, militants overpowered the local resistance and were successful in establishing a foothold in the area [13-15]. Similarly, the militants sway and activities in the adjoining district of Lower Dir was increasing. On March 30, 2009, the District Police In-charge was killed in a gun battle with the suspected militants [16]. There were also reports of Taliban militants entering another adjoining district, Shangla [17]. Incidents like above created the impression that the militants do not intend to lay down their arms even after the promulgation of Nizam-e-Adal Regulation (NAR) 2009 as they promised in the peace accord. There was also fear of them extending their influence beyond Swat area.

Although, Sufi Muhammad denounces violence and claims to believe in peaceful struggle, but his hard line approach adopted after the conclusion of the NAR made it increasingly difficult for even the right leaning politicians and journalists to defend him [18]. His repeated public utterances that parliament and judiciary are un-islamic have been castigated by all and sundry including the clergy. He along with the Taliban appears to be fast losing support as many religious groups have started openly criticizing them [19-22]. This has been reflected in both the print and electronic media.
where previously, a sizeable section would call for peace talks with Militants and would term military action an attempt to appease Americans. Now, when the core demand of militants has been fulfilled, there is a growing realization that the state should enforce its writ and take on the Taliban refusing to give up militancy. The Taliban, who earlier had good relations with the media, have also felt the change in their tone and on April 26, 2009 warned Swat journalist to only report “Facts” causing further resentment [23].

Counter insurgency operation in Swat started in October 2007 with limited public support. However, Taliban’s refusal to renounce militancy after the ratification of NAR has alienated them and the military operation launched in Lower Dir on 26th April 2009 against Taliban had a wide public approval. The military operation was extended to Buner on 29th April 2009 [24] and the Army launched another operation in militant’s strong hold of Swat district to reign in the rebellious Taliban on 6 May, 2009 [25] amid claims that at least 4000 militants have been present. Pakistan forces have been advancing in Swat region and within few days, the army managed to wrest control of Daggar, Bagra, Jewar, Balandari Pass and Ambela heights in Buner, and Maidan in Lower Dir from the militants. By 13 May 2009, the ISPR spokesperson, Gen Athar Abbas was claiming major successes in Swat, Shangla, Dir Lower and Buner. whereas 751 militants were reportedly killed [26].

The new offensive started as Pakistan’s President Zardari held meetings with Afghan President Karzai and President Obama in Washington and reinforced his commitment to eliminate the menace of military from his country. While answering a question in a press conference, he said that military operations against extremists would last until normalcy returns to the troubled Swat Valley [27]. Similarly, Pakistan Prime Minister announced in a speech on May 7 2009 that the government will not bow before the militants and terrorists but will force them to lay down their weapons and will not compromise with them. He said he had ordered the military to rid Swat and other areas of the militants. The prime minister also appealed to the nation, political leadership, civil society, religious leaders and all the institutions of the country to lend their complete support to the government and the armed forces for the cause of Pakistan [28].

The operation, however, has resulted in the exodus of more than 1.3 million from Swat and adjoining regions who fled their houses in complete panic, leaving behind the entire physical context of their existence [29, 30]. For now, these internally displaced persons (IDPs) are totally dependent upon aid for their survival. While the number of IDPs may even increase further, the string of camps and food distribution centres setup by Pakistani government and relief agencies are not nearly enough to accommodate all. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, has called for a massive aid operation to help those displaced in
north-west Pakistan. While visiting one of the makeshift camps he described the situation as dramatic as the conflict itself [31]. Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani has also appealed to the foreign countries to help Pakistan deal with the human tide. United Nations, United States and United Kingdom have been quick to announce emergency aid while Turkey, China and Suadi Arabia also indicated their willingness to help[32, 33]. However, a lot more is required to enable 1.3 million people meet to get basic necessities of life. The military operation has been conducted on the expectation that a wide section of society would back it. The length of the operation and rehabilitation of the internally displaced refugees will be critical in winning over the hearts and minds of the local populace of the restive Swat region.

Experts fear that the support for military action may go if the military operation is stretched and the displaced persons do not return to their homes soon.

Meanwhile, the displaced persons also need to be taken well care of and it is imperative that the rest of the world should come forward to help Pakistan in its hour of need.

References

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