

The state surrender to radicals

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Could it get any worse than this for the PML-N in Pakistan? 27 November 2017 should be a landmark even for Pakistan's standards. The government, aided by the military, has surrendered to a group of radicals who have been protesting in in the twin cities – Islamabad and Rawalpindi for the last twenty days.

A Brief Anatomy of the Crisis

The right-wing group – Tehreek Labaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLY), led by Khadim Hussain Rizvi came with a few thousand supporters to occupy the Faizabad interchange linking the twin cities. The protest started during the first week of November continued till 27 November 2017. Their primary demands were two – to restore a particular clause relating to the finality of the Prophethood in the Election Law and the removal of Law Minister. The National Assembly had already passed a resolution on the first demand – referring the disputed phrase in the clause as a clerical error.

The PML-N government did not want to take any action against the protestors. Fearing a backlash in the forthcoming elections in 2018, the PML-N allowed the TLY to occupy the crucial intersection almost for twenty days. Despite causing immense hardship to the common people and repeated calls from the civil society to restore order, the governments in Islamabad and Punjab sat tight and did nothing.

The government gave few deadlines to the protestors to peacefully disperse. When they refused to adhere, the government gave them new deadlines. It was evident, that the government did not have the spine to act. Perhaps, it did not want to escalate the situation, which would lead to any political instability resulting in a soft or actual coup by the Establishment.

The judiciary had to intervene and ask the government to take action. With judiciary pressurising, the government on 25 November assembled an elite police force to evict the protestors. When everyone thought, that the police action would be the climax of the crisis, lit turned out to be an anti-climax. After firing a few teargas shells and arresting some protestors, the police action, for reasons known only to the government, was withdrawn.

One thought, the State did not have the courage to fight the protestors on 25 November. What happened two days later on 27 November was even worse. It not only surrendered to the protestors, but also crawled towards the TRY with bent knees. Consider the following.

The State Capitulation and the Self Guillotine

After retreating on 25 November, the interior ministry had requested the military, to deploy troops to restore law and order.

The Chief of Army Staff, Gen Bajwa instead of carrying out the government order made a strange point. He wanted to reach an amicable settlement with the protestors. Earlier, he had asked the Prime Minister to find a peaceful solution for the problem. A tweet from the ISPR even equated the government and the protesters on the same page and asked “both parties” to shun violence.

The military seems to have mediated between the government and the TLY. On 27 November, an agreement was reached. The terms of the agreement have far-reaching implications for future governments, and any other radical group that would want to adopt similar pressure tactics against the government to realize its unreasonable demands.

Terms of Surrender: Is it Real, or Fake News?

The military negotiated the following settlement between the government and the TLY. It is an unbelievable document now available in the media. One would want to think, the document is actually a part of fake news. Since the document is available on the Dawn website, one of the most sensible newspapers in Pakistan, it has to be real.

The agreement talks about six points, highlighting the abject surrender of the PML-N government. First, it accepts the TLY demand that Zahid Hamid, the federal law minister be removed. In return, the TLY has agreed not to issue any fatwa against the minister! How can any self-respecting government accede to such a provision? If the first part of the above condition is bad, the second part is worse. The TLY has magnanimously agreed not to issue a fatwa against an elected minister of the National Parliament!

Second, the government has also agreed to make public a report prepared by the Raja Zafarul Haq committee. This is not an open ended agreement, for it stipulates that the report will be published in 30 days!

The Zafarul Haq committee has been constituted earlier by the government to find who was originally responsible for changing the clause in the election oath. One is not able to understand why the government felt it necessary to order a committee to look into the issue in the first place. But, that action seems to be a better one, when compared what the government has agreed to on 27 November – to release it in 30 days.

Third point is related to the release of all protestors who have been violating all norms of governance

since they occupied the Faizabad exchange. Everything would be expunged.

Fourth point, rubs the salt further on the government. It calls for establishing an inquiry board “to probe and decide what action to take against the government and administration officials over the operation conducted by security forces against protesters on Saturday, November 25.” Isn’t the responsibility of the government and civilian administration to restore law and order? Why should any action be taken against them, for discharging their duties?

If there is an action that needs to be taken against the government and the administration, it should be on why they didn’t take any action, and why they allowed the situation to deteriorate. Worse, didn’t the judiciary order the government to ensure that the protestors be dispersed? The judiciary should consider the above point as a contempt of court, and pursue against those who have prepared the document.

The above point also has a time frame! It wants the action to be taken against the officials in 30 days.

Fifth point talks about compensation “for the loss of government and private assets incurred from November 6 until the end of the sit-in.” So who would provide the compensation? Perhaps, the document should have identified a compensatory amount for all the protestors, who had to leave their respective jobs and come to Faizabad. Shouldn’t the government compensate them as well? How dare the government did not yield to their requests on day one? Why waste their precious time for twenty days?

Wasn’t it inhumane on the part of the government to allow the noble protestors to live in tents without proper amenities in the middle of the road? Shouldn’t the government have arranged for materials to the protestors, in aiding them to occupy the main exchange? Poor protestors had to manage the containers on their own to block the roads? Did the government care about their right to life and protest?

Sarcasm apart, why would an elected government agree to such an insulting agreement? If there was pressure from the Establishment to sign on the dotted lines, the government should have rather resigned. What they have done will not only hurt their future dealing with similar protests, but also any other government. A bad precedent is set.

Further Questions

Two larger questions also need to be addressed. Why would the military intervene politically and try to mediate between the government and a protest group? The Establishment may have attempted to project the PML-N in the bad light, but in the process, has it done justice to itself as an institution?

The civil society is likely to ask multiple questions. The judiciary seems to have fired the first salvo. A hearing happened to be in the process on the Faizabad issue at the Islamabad High Court on 27 November. Justice Shaukat Siddiqui who was hearing the Faizabad case, according to a report published in the Dawn, has “lashed out at the government as well as the Army for the role assigned to the military “as the mediator” in the agreement.” He has been quoted to have asked, “Who is the Army to adopt a mediator's role?” and “Where does the law assign this role to a major general?”

Will the military and the government answer?