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## THE LAHORE ATTACKS: The Dual Challenge

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In early March this year in Islamabad, analysts told me they considered that the country had turned a corner on combatting terrorism and that the situation has much improved since 2013. Sadly, that no longer seems to be the case, with the radical Islamist group *Jamaat ul Ahrar* effectively throwing down the gauntlet to the Nawaz Sharif government in its Punjab stronghold. But the challenge is as much about the narrative on radicalisation as it is about the narrative over and actions against terrorism and responses to terrorist attacks.

The Easter Sunday bombing of an amusement park in Lahore is tragically yet another in a series of cowardly attacks since December 2014 that have specifically targeted the vulnerable in the name of challenging the state: school children in the Army Public School Peshawar in December 2014, university students and teachers in Charsadda's Bacha Khan University in January 2016, and now, the massacre of mostly women and children, a large number of whom – but by no means all – were from the Christian community, just enjoying a day out in the spring weather in an amusement park.

The government has reacted swiftly, with a muscular stance, a large number of arrests and the launch of a military operation in the Punjab state. Prime Minister Sharif addressed the country on Monday, vowing that “*those who are fomenting terrorism, sectarian hatred and extremism will not be allowed to flee and will face justice*”. Laudable, necessary, but insufficient, in a context where extremism, radicalism, and militancy, coupled with economic disparity, have created severe fissures within Pakistani society.

Reforming the blasphemy laws, often used to target the poor and the vulnerable, would be a good step in the right direction. But this alone would not be sufficient to address bigotry, obscurantism, the availability of hate literature, the exclusionary content of the educational curriculum, and above all, to ensure that the phenomenon of the increasingly conservative nature of Pakistani society – whether one likes it or not – is harnessed for the good, not for the destruction, of the country. Inter-sectarian violence and hatred among Muslims (which have nothing to do with the blasphemy laws) have, in the view of some analysts, reached an all-time high, to an extent that unless it is speedily and adequately addressed, it is considered that the outcomes could potentially benefit the nascent Da'esh/Islamic

State in Pakistan. Since the aims of some *jihadi* groups operating in the country unequivocally include the overthrow of the Pakistani state, there is much to be lost – or won.

Less tragic in outcome, but what should be equally worrying for the government, are the large numbers of people that turned out to mark the 40<sup>th</sup> day since the execution of Mumtaz Qadri, a convicted murderer hung on March 1 this year, for the assassination of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer, whose views on the blasphemy laws he disagreed with. Ten thousand people demonstrated in Islamabad the same day that the Lahore massacre occurred. The senseless destruction of property, a rampage through the commercial Blue Area of Islamabad, and a robust display of the street power that the fringe parties and banned groups can call upon, ensued. Damages from the protests reportedly total nearly Rs 150 million (approximately 1,26 million euros). At the time of writing, although hundreds of arrests had been made, some 700 demonstrators had staged a sit-in demanding that Qadri be declared a martyr, calling for the imposition of the *Shari'a* (Islamic law) on the country, saying they would not move until that happened.

The propaganda coup for both sets of actors against the Nawaz Sharif government is in the rebuttal of his claims to his citizens that he has terrorism under control, and that the country is once again safe for foreign investors. This is not just about investment from abroad, either. The stronger Pakistan's economy becomes, the greater will be the shared stake in society, and the greater the possibilities for healing the fissures which divide it. Actions against a state which many feel does not represent them, result in outcomes like targeted killings of those whose beliefs someone does not agree with. Up till now, however, the increased divide between the "have's" and the "have-not's" (which some elite groups are finally beginning to become worried about), the growing radicalisation of society, the disconnect between the discourse of the state and the increasingly conservative mass of the population, have all basically gone unaddressed in the narrative and actions of the state.

What is fundamentally at stake in both these events therefore is the fight for the soul of the Pakistani state and its Constitution (which protects the rights of minorities and freedom of worship), and about what sort of state all of its population – not just the elites, not just the religious element – want it to be, going forward. Pakistan and its current government therefore has to decide what its identity as an Islamic state really means. This will require a shift from only addressing counter-terrorism (necessary, but not sufficient), towards developing a counter-narrative to radicalisation that the conservative – but not yet violent – element in the country can subscribe to. This would avoid a well-organised minority potentially dragging the country in a direction that the majority do not want it to go. "*Winning hearts and minds*" in a way that resonates with the religious conservatives, but which also protects other sections of society whose belief systems, thinking and lifestyles differ from these, will be essential. Without this counter-narrative on both identity and ideology, the descent on the slippery slope will gain speed, to the detriment of Pakistan and its people. They deserve better.