

## **Role of communication in radicalization of Swat** *(by Khalid Aziz)*

The holding of a game changing National Seminar on De-radicalization by the Pakistan Army in Swat in early July is an important development aimed at shifting the existing strategy of confronting violence in Swat through the use of military force to finding long term solutions for rooting out the causes of extremism and radical thought.

Swat was regained after painful sacrifices paid in blood and treasure. In this war, as one speaker commented during the seminar, the total Pakistani military loses are one and a half army division as a result of "Shahdats" and injuries. This excludes the losses on the civilian side that were substantial. The casualties of the Pakistan military are thus higher than those of all the 46 nations fighting in Afghanistan put together. Pakistan may have not have come to the unrealistic expectations of others, yet its sacrifices for global peace, cannot be trivialized.

One of the best antidotes against extremism and radicalization is the effective use of strategic communication where the mind-set of the population is positively influenced. Communication is made through speech, writing or through the electronic medium. The US Defense Science Board 2004 Summer Study, "Transition to & from Hostilities," concluded that strategic communication in conflict stricken countries is as important, if not more, than military operations. Thus any sum of money spent on strategic communication has more value than expenditures on other elements in a counter radicalization strategy. Unfortunately, in Pakistan not much emphasis has been paid to this aspect for countering radicalization.

One of the main reasons for the success of Mullah Fazalullah during the Swat conflict was the clever and effective use of FM broadcasting through an illicit transmitter. He not only won new adherents through threats but even won the sympathies of the women of Swat through this medium. They were ultimately induced to contribute to his cause by providing him voluntary donations and convincing their men-folk to join the ranks of the radicals.

The Swat militants executed civilians and police personnel and also beheaded more than 17 females. After these tragic turns the army was asked in May 2009 for its assistance to crush the rebellion in Swat. This forced 750,000 persons to leave their homes and seek refuge in other places to avoid injury due to fighting. The terrorist rule had also destroyed the economy of Swat.

In a 2010 survey conducted over 384 randomly selected households in Swat, 78% of the respondents believed that FM broadcasts by Fazalullah and his group over "Radio Mullah" were effective in enlarging support for the Taliban. 67% of the households were of the view that face to face communications in the form of sermons preached in mosques created support for the Swat Taliban. In this connection it may be noted that those Afghans who had come to Pakistan in the 1980's as refugees, grew up in camps and remained there. Their children received religious education and most were able to find employment as Imams in the local mosques. One of the prominent social change in the social landscape of KPK and FATA since the 1990s has been the transfer of control over mosques to Afghan refugees.

Since the parents of these Imams were aligned to Jihadi organizations of Afghanistan, many children inherited these extreme views. Today many of the mosques in Swat are managed by Prayer leaders of Afghan descent. Many had become associated with the Pakistani alumni of other Madressahs run by the religious parties. These links played a prominent role in providing protection to the extremists in Swat, when the MMA religious alliance government ruled NWFP after the 2003 elections. In the same survey, 75% of the households thought that the MMA government supported the Swat militants. It could not be otherwise.

However, one of the most pernicious effects of electronic communications was its impact on women in Swat. As soon as the Taliban took control they forbid women to be seen in open spaces; thus the women were confined to homes. Then the Taliban banned other competing media like the TV and normal radio

and they were termed un-Islamic; the TV was outlawed for showing images and the radio for broadcasting music. Thus women became prisoners in their homes, when they had no alternative sources of information except “Mullah Radio”; a bizarre situation occurred when listening to “Radio Mullah” became their only pass-time. Many ladies who participated in the survey said that listening to the radio and calling Fazalullah on the phone provided them “empowerment”. They could telephone the leader of the Swat Taliban and lodge complaints against their men folk many of whom received warnings and had to bend to provide rights to their women folk; something that the state has failed to provide.

Thus many women in Swat became captives of the Taliban and supplied them with finances and manpower. Even after the military operation had removed the terrorist network of the Taliban from Swat some women still yearn for the good old days when “Radio Mullah” could be heard again and they would have power.

There are many lessons here that can be usefully adopted in transforming the mind-set of the people through the use of modern means of communication. It could turn out to be the winner for confronting extremism and countering radicalism; an instrument that must be used effectively in the new national strategy against de-radicalization.

Obviously, if the tide is to be turned then Pakistan must invest heavily in communication in its different forms. It is a truism amongst experts that the value of mind transformation is a higher virtue than economic development in the war against extremism.