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Pakistan's Crackdown on Terror Financing: All For Show?

By Umer Ali
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In a major move, which for some is a quite familiar one, the State Bank of Pakistan directed all banks across the country to freeze the accounts of 2,021 individuals listed in the Fourth Schedule of the Anti-Terrorism Act. Formulated in 1997, the Anti-Terrorism Act allows the government to list individuals such that they are required to seek police permission to enter an area, empowering law enforcement agencies to observe their movements, among other things.

“All banks, development finance institutions, and microfinance banks have been advised to take immediate action as per requirement of the law against individuals, whose names are included in the lists of fourth schedulers provided by the National Counter-Terrorism Authority (NACTA),” a State Bank of Pakistan source told *Dawn*.

The list is dominated by representatives and leaders of various sectarian outfits, including well-known names like Ahmed Ludhianvi of Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), Aurangzeb Farooqi of ASWJ, Mullah Abdul Aziz of Lal Masjid, and Ramzan Mengal of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.

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Interestingly, however, there is no mention of any office-bearer of Kashmir-related groups like Jamat-ud-Dawa (JuD), Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), or Hizbul Mujahideen (HuM).

In Pakistan, many see this move with suspicion, referring to similar steps in the past that turned out to be highly ineffective.

For example when, for the first time ever, Pervez Musharraf banned jihadi outfits fighting in Kashmir and Afghanistan, declaring his support for the U.S.-led war against terror. Even then, these groups changed their names and continued to operate like before.

Owais Tohid, a veteran journalist who covered these groups for a decade, reported the same in his December 2003 piece for *Newsline Magazine*. Titled “And the Jihad goes on,” the piece explored the ways through which the banned groups continued their activities.

“Prominent leaders like Masood Azhar, chief of Jaish-e-Mohammad, and Maulana Fazl-ur Rehman Khalil, head of the banned Harkatul Mujahideen, issued statements in the Punjab, delivered addresses urging participants to come forward for jihad,” Tohid wrote.

In his now 13-year-old report, he discovered, “About 600 leaders and members of the banned groups have been asked to furnish surety bonds of good conduct, involving surety money of 100,000 rupees.”

He further reported that thousands of copies of jihadi newspapers and magazines were being sold on a daily basis.

Thirteen years on, Pakistan is still struggling to put effective curbs on the very same outfits.

In a 2015 article published by the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS), Safiya Aftab observed:

An important Counter Terrorism activity is denting the militant economy, through all possible ways: tracing the financial mechanisms of funding used by militants, neutralizing those sources, and preventing banned outfits from raising funds domestically or internationally.

She continued, “This element has received relatively little attention in Pakistan, for a variety of reasons like general lack of expertise in financial crime, and lack of appreciation of the intricacies of the militant economy.”

Amir Rana, the director of PIPS, believes that most of these groups generate funds through bank robberies, smuggling, and kidnapping for ransom. Commenting on why the State Bank of Pakistan’s move might not be effective, he says, “While the heads of many sectarian groups have been included in the list, it’s a given fact that their bank accounts wouldn’t have much of the money being generated through different means.”

“These groups hold several other accounts, through which large transactions are processed. Banning just the official accounts is not going to change anything.”

Senior journalist Azaz Syed, who works with *Geo News*, agrees that freezing the official bank accounts of selected individuals won't change much. "Around 80 percent of their money comes through illegal means and it never reaches the bank accounts," he says.

"This might just be a mere eyewash because most of their transactions are made in cash, hence there is no point freezing their bank accounts."

Syed broke the news of the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), which suspended the citizenship of 2,021 suspects linked with militant and sectarian groups last week.

"Prominent names on the list whose identity cards have been blocked include those of religious personalities including Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat leader Maulana Mohammad Ahmed Ludhianvi, Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) cleric Maulana Abdul Aziz, Majlis-e-Wahdat-e-Muslimeen leader Allama Maqsood Ali Domki, and Mohsin Najfi," he reported.

While the move received significant praise from certain quarters who deemed it a necessary step in the right direction, many human rights activists, lawyers, and journalists declared it to be a grave violation of basic human rights.

Azaz Syed himself takes the same view. "Instead of acting against the hardened terrorists, government is suspending the citizenships of many individuals on the basis of mere suspicion," he says.

He added, "There is no court order to suspend their citizenship as well, which makes the order even more questionable."

Syed further says that the absence of Kashmir-linked jihadi groups is big point of ambiguity on the supposed shift in state's counterterror paradigm.

In an explosive scoop last week, *Dawn's* senior staffer Cyril Almeida revealed a serious confrontation between civil-military leadership in a recent, undisclosed meeting.

Asking the military to act effectively against terrorists of all hues, the civilian government reportedly warned that Pakistan would face international isolation otherwise.

The highlight of this meeting, as reported by Almeida, was the "stunning and unexpectedly bold intervention" by Chief Minister of Punjab Shahbaz Sharif who blasted the director general of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Lt. General Rizwan Akhtar, by saying that whenever his government acted against certain militants, ISI worked behind the scenes to set them free.

The exchange corroborated this writer's report for *The Diplomat*, in which senior civilian security official lamented the military's intervention when Punjab's Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) raided JeM strongholds.

Almeida further reported that DG ISI Rizwan Akhtar would now visit all four provinces accompanied by the National Security Advisor Naseer Khan Janjua to meet the apex committees, as well as ISI sector commanders.

The message of these meetings, one of which Almeida claimed already took place in Lahore, is that military-led intelligence agencies are not to interfere if law enforcement acts against militant groups that are banned or until now considered off-limits for civilian action.

After a suicide attack killed over hundred people on Easter eve this March, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif ordered the immediate arrest of suspects on the Fourth Schedule list. However, this wasn't followed up and the news died out.

Earlier in 2015, a month after the horrible Army Public School attack in Peshawar in late-2014 that killed scores of children, Pakistan announced the freezing of JuD bank accounts. The announcement coincided with the visit of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, who appreciated the move.

A document by the interior ministry confirmed the proscribing of Harkat-ul-Jihad Islami, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation, Ummah Tameer-i-Nau, Haji Khairullah Hajji Sattar Money Exchange, Rahat Limited, Roshan Money Exchange, Al Akhtar Trust, Al Rashid Trust, the Haqqani network, and Jamaat-ud-Dawa.

However, in recent months, JuD's activities have only increased, with its charity wing, Falah-i-Insaniyat Foundation (FIF), expanding its "relief operations" to the rural areas of Sindh and Balochistan.

JuD is not the only group operating freely inside Pakistan, despite several claims by the government. In the month of Ramzan (Ramadan), Jaish-e-Mohammad's charity wing, Al-Rehmat trust, openly collected donations outside mosques in Karachi, often in the presence of Pakistan Rangers personnel.

The Al-Rashid Trust, which is notoriously known for its terror network in Pakistan and Afghanistan, was also banned twice by the government. It changed its name to the Al-Ameen Trust and resumed its operations throughout the country. Even today, it's operating freely under the name of the Maymar Trust.

Despite this history of deliberate inefficiency by the government, Fahd Hamayun, the program and research manager at Pakistan's Jinnah Institute, believes the recent moves to be a good step forward. "This is a step in the right direction and should necessitate some level of parliamentary oversight to ensure effective implementation. Turning off the taps on terrorism financing is essential if the government is keen to demonstrate its commitment to the National Action Plan," he says.

Criticizing the reluctance of the government to update the Fourth Schedule list, he adds, "So far the Interior Ministry's reluctance to update its list of proscribed organizations is indicative of state lethargy in putting a blanket ban on all terror groups."

In the end, this move will either turn out to just be for show or will actually show results – only time will tell what the government of Pakistan has planned to finally put an end to the operations of banned militant and sectarian groups in the country.