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## Election violence rolls on, unabated

### PAKISTAN'S CAMPAIGN OF TERROR

By Syed Fazl-e-Haider

4/29/2013

KARACHI - Terrorist attacks by the Taliban continue unabated in Pakistan, creating chaos ahead of the May 11 general election. The militants have stepped up attacks on candidates, offices, corner meetings and rallies of liberal and secular political parties, including the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), and the Awami National Party (ANP).

In the latest incidents of pre-poll violence, a bomb attack on an ANP gathering on late Sunday evening in Swabi killed one child and injured 13 people. Two bombs exploded in Peshawar and Kohat areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa on Sunday, killing at least eight people and injuring 30 others. Similarly, a blast near an election candidate's corner meeting, also on Sunday, killed one child and injured five people in Quetta, the capital of southwestern Balochistan province.

The weekend violence followed a string of blasts and attacks last week on elections offices and political gatherings of the MQM, ANP and PPP that left dozens of people dead and more than 100 injured in the southern port city of Karachi. The pre-poll violence raises concerns that deteriorating law and order could mar the May 11 election day itself.

Pakistan's commercial capital Karachi came to a halt on Sunday as the MQM observed a strike to protest a bomb attack the previous day on party's election camp office in Karachi, in which three people were killed and 20 others were injured. This was the third attack on an MQM election office in the past week and the protest was the fourth over the same period in Karachi to demonstrate anger at killings at the hands of the militants. A corner meeting of PPP was also

targeted in Lyari area of Karachi on Saturday, leaving two people dead and injuring seven, including the PPP candidate.

The surge in terror attacks indicates that the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and its allied extremist groups have come into full swing to sabotage the election process in the political strongholds of MQM, ANP and PPP.

Last week, TTP distributed pamphlets in Buner and Peshawar in northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and different areas of Karachi warning people not to participate in the election campaign or cast their votes at polling stations on May 11. The pamphlets warned voters that they would themselves be responsible for their own lives on the day.

On the other hand, Pakistani Taliban have announced that they will not target right-wing political parties including Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) led by former prime minister of Nawaz Sharif, the Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) led by former Pakistani cricketer Imran Khan, Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), and Jamiat-i-Ulma Islam (JUI-F) led by Maulana Fazl-ur-Rehman.

"Taliban shura had decided to target those secular political parties which were part of the previous coalition government and involved in the operation in Swat, Fata and other areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa," Dawn reported TTP spokesperson Ehsanullah Ehsan as saying.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has expressed serious concern at the continuing terrorist attacks on election candidates, activists and campaigns of certain political parties. The HRCP believes that they unmistakably display an angle of partisan politics in which parties that advocate certain views are being attacked.

"If this targeted violence persists, it would render the elections meaningless and make the country hostage to fascist forces," HRCP said in a press release.

The country's biggest province, Punjab, has so far been safe from pre-poll terror attacks, hence the political parties are holding huge rallies and large public meetings there. Security concerns in other provinces, including Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, have led there to lackluster election campaigns.

Dawn commented,

There is Punjab, where election campaigns are in full swing and the vibrancy and the intensity of electoral competition can be felt across the province. And then there is Balochistan, Fata, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh, where many a campaign has either come to a shuddering halt or is limping along. ? The choice between death and campaigning that many politicians and several parties are confronting is so fundamentally anti-democratic and fearsome that it amounts to savagely distorting the electoral process even before a single vote is cast.

The asymmetry is as obvious as it is expected: liberal and left-of-center parties are in the militants' cross-hairs while the religious right and centre-right parties are able to campaign and mobilize support largely unmolested. Now, with each passing day, there is a greater and greater

need for the mainstream parties not targeted so far to speak out and denounce the violence - particularly the PML-N and the PTI.

Last week, MQM leader Farooq Sattar put a question mark on the transparency of upcoming general election and said that the prevailing terrorist activities in Karachi and Quetta showed that the election would neither be fair nor transparent.

"In the given circumstances, when we are receiving open threats from terrorists, our offices are being attacked and party officials being killed, we are in no position to hold big rallies like other parties," Sattar said.

ANP, the former ruling party in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, has also questioned a claim by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) that the vote will be free and fair as there is no equal opportunity for electioneering for secular political parties. ANP spokesperson Zahid Khan complained that no practical step has been taken by the ECP and the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government to provide foolproof security to the ANP leadership.

A recent survey report issued by Free and Fair Election Network reveals that 13 incidents of electoral violence took place across the country between April 13 and 19 and claimed 23 lives, mostly targeting workers of the ANP, while 54 others were injured.

Daily Times in its editorial said, "If this is the state of things before the landmark elections one shudders to think what will happen on the big day when scores of people will venture out of their homes to partake in the history making transition towards democracy."

It further said,

On election day, millions of people stepping out to vote will make the perfect targets for the terrorists who look forward to inflicting a maximum number of deaths and leaving destruction in their wake. Those who have vowed to sabotage the elections are proving true to their words but what are the caretaker government and the law enforcement agencies doing about this? Nothing, it seems.

The very nature of the blasts points towards the handiwork of the groups that have vowed death to the nation: the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), the latter having been behind the attacks on Shia Hazaras in Quetta. These are the only groups with this kind of modus operandi.

There seems to be no strategy, no coordination and no motivation to ensure that these elections go smoothly. It is time the caretakers wake up before the situation becomes so horrific that there may not be an election to ensure a historic democratic transition.