

The Business

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Unjust behaviour

The treatment meted out to Pakistani citizens at Pakistani embassies is in such stark contrast to the service delivery mechanisms developed by embassies of other countries, especially India, to facilitate their citizens. It is commonly said that you can forget about something if it is urgently needed and you need to go through the Pakistani embassy for it, because the staff there usually acts as if it is on a three-year paid vacation rather than a very important working assignment. The matter of Pakistani expats being very unhappy with the ambassador in Saudi Arabia first hit the press in the early days of the pandemic last year when people who needed to travel urgently to Pakistan, and also bring back dead bodies of their relatives with them, were not facilitated at all. Instead the staff at the embassy, in some cases, left people in the lurch and did not even respond to their desperate pleas for help. Later, when one lady who apparently needed a special travel document was kept waiting all day and threatened with arrest by local authorities, she filed a complaint with the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and blew the lid off the whole thing.

The Foreign Office, in its official response, snapped out the usual line that it had a policy of "zero tolerance, whatsoever, for any lapse in public service delivery," which looks and sounds nice in principle, but things are indeed very different in reality. Therefore just the fact that the prime minister has taken such strong notice of the behaviour of the ambassador and his staff, something that has never happened before, should at least make other workers at other embassies fall in line and do their job properly. This development should also make the Foreign Office realise that its job extends beyond issuing spirited statements about the Line of Control (LoC) violations, etc., and its central purpose is to make the lives of Pakistanis living in other countries easier, not more difficult. Perhaps it's not entirely a coincidence that this development has come ahead of the PM's planned state visit to the kingdom. He has often spoken in favour of the Pakistani labour community there and even requested the Saudi crown prince to use his influence to free a number of Pakistani labourers detained on minor charges in the kingdom's jails. They form the bulk of the two million or so Pakistanis that live there and send about \$4.5 billion home every year.

We need to look only to our immediate neighbours like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India, to learn some of the most important lessons because their governments have made sure that their embassies provide the best possible services to their non-resident citizens all over the world. Our embassies, on the other hand, not only drag people to their offices even on the slightest pretext, but now it turns out that they also extort their own people and take bribes even to address their legitimate concerns. It is now for the government to adopt a course of action that will not only weed out the non-delivering dead wood from our embassies, but also make sure that nobody can fleece innocent citizens in the name of the state ever again.

Terms of engagement

MALEEHA LODHI

Now that a backchannel between Pakistan and India has been confirmed by a senior official it would be appropriate to evaluate its nature and implications. Efforts to de-escalate tensions between the two nuclear neighbours are always welcome. But given the history of false starts and the one step forward, two steps backwards engagement in this long-troubled relationship it is important to take into account lessons of the past and on-ground realities, especially as the dire situation created by India in occupied Kashmir remains unchanged.

There is nothing unusual about a backchannel. It is frequently used when formal dialogue between countries is suspended. This was often the case in the past when Pakistan and India demurred from engaging in open talks. Backchannels are useful to confidentially probe, explore and assess how much give there is in the other's position. This is harder in a formal forum where negotiating parties stick to maximalist positions at least at the start. During the Musharraf period backchannel negotiations on the Kashmir dispute took place over three years to find an interim settlement. This marked the most serious effort in recent decades to find a political solution of Kashmir. The talks were conducted by civil servants who enjoyed the confidence of president Pervez Musharraf and prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. What has been disclosed about the current backchannel is that talks are being conducted by the chiefs of intelligence of the two countries. This isn't the only difference from

past backroom efforts. The Musharraf era process began with a public acknowledgment by both sides of the resumption of formal talks. The joint statement of Jan 6, 2004 stated that "the resumption of the composite dialogue will lead to peaceful settlement of all bilateral issues, including Jammu and Kashmir, to the satisfaction of both sides". The backchannel subsequently set in train was an accompaniment to formal talks that covered all issues of priority for both sides. Negotiators on the backchannel were publicly named.

While information about the present backchannel has been revealed by Pakistani officials this has been met by silence on the Indian side. There have been no background briefings or leaks by Indian officials. This one-sided admission may have unwittingly created the impression of over-eagerness by the Pakistani side. Moreover, making public disclosures at a preliminary stage of sensitive talks raises the question of whether it is prudent before anything significant has been agreed.

As the present engagement is being cast as 'talks about talks' it might be useful to keep the following factors and principles in view. One, Pakistani interlocutors should seek to test and verify — assess if the Indian move is tactical or strategic and proceed cautiously. Our officials claim India is prepared to talk on all issues. What should be ascertained is what exactly is meant by that. Whether it means Indian willingness for substantive discussion on outstanding disputes including Kashmir or just a 'dialogue of the deaf' and re-statement of its familiar position that Kashmir is India's 'internal matter' and the 'new' status quo

created by its Aug 5, 2019, action is non-negotiable. Two, Pakistan must maintain its red lines on its principled position on Kashmir especially as Indian media reports suggest that Delhi's expectation is for Pakistan to cease insisting on reversal of the illegal annexation of Kashmir. While pursuing the near-term aim, as identified by Pakistani officials, of providing 'relief to the Kashmiri people', presumably through CBMs, this should be done in tandem with and not as substitute for substantive talks on the issue. Again, past experience is instructive. Kashmir-specific CBMs agreed in the composite dialogue during 2004-08 were an accompaniment to and not replacement of negotiations on Kashmir.

Three, 'process' in the backchannel should not be mistaken for substance. It has long been India's aim to draw Pakistan into a process with no outcomes in settling disputes and thus to demonstrate to the world how reasonable it is without conceding anything. Delhi has sought to achieve normalisation on its terms without resolving disputes and instead prioritising the two T's, terrorism and trade. From this perspective, normalisation for the sake of normalisation should be avoided as this will be transient, lack substantive content and therefore durability. De-escalation of tensions is an aim worth pursuing but that is different from normalisation, which should be predicated on efforts and progress in resolving differences. Normalisation can only come about gradually and should be distinguished from managing tensions.

Four, the backchannel should not become the sole track of Pakistan-India engagement. It should

hitting the economy of that particular country and will be more effective than merely breaking up of diplomatic relations.

Apparently this is a gigantic task which the PM has taken upon him and also pledged to lead the campaign himself. Still it is a positive move in the right direction as collective voice of the Islamic world will certainly and surely will carry more weight and impact than that of Pakistan alone. In all fairness, Prime Minister Imran Khan can very easily be ranked to be amongst the first leaders of the Islamic world to raise the issue of Islamophobia at international level and continues to forcefully raise his voice for effectively combating this scourge and calling upon the Western countries and their leaders to show respect to the sentiments of the Muslims who cannot stand blasphemy being committed in any manner for their most loved and respect Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

And he continues to raise his voice against Islamophobia in an unending manner availing every opportunity when he is addressing an international gathering or forum. Tackling the menace of Islamophobia was the main theme of his address at the 14th Summit of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) held in Makkah, Saudi Arabia, in June 2019, within months of his coming into power only in August 2018.

This was followed by his maiden address to the 74th UN General Assembly session in New York in September 2019 when he mentioned that trends of nationalism, increased global tensions and giving rise to racial and religious hatred and violence against vulnerable minorities had accentuated Islamophobia, Muslims continue to be targeted with impunity in many countries, our shrines are being destroyed, our Prophet (PBUH) insulted, the Holy Quran burnt and all this was being done in the name of freedom of speech. It was on this occasion that the PM called upon the world form to declare an "International Day to Combat Islamophobia", build a coalition to fight this scourge which, most unfortunately splits the humanity.

In his virtual address to the 75th UN General Assembly session in Septem-

ber 2020 (due to the pandemic of Covid-19), the Prime Minister of Pakistan had called for willful provocations and incitement to hate and violence must be universally outlawed and repeated his demand declaration of an International Day to combat the menace of Islamophobia. Continuing his efforts to highlight the evil impact of Islamophobia in the western world mainly, the PM addressed letters to the leaders of all Muslim countries in October and November 2020 wherein he had listed an agenda for collective action by the Muslim Ummah against Islamophobia. He had, as the record goes, also demanded a ban on Islamophobia in any form and manner on Facebook in his letter addressed to CEO of Facebook Mark Zuckerberg. It is quite appreciable that like he has been raising voice for the right of self-determination for the Kashmiris, the PM has also been raising the issue of Islamophobia at all other international forums from time to time including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO).

Intense diplomatic efforts of Pakistan for months together have started showing positive response from the Muslim Ummah as towards end of last year, a key resolution was adopted by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) obviously at the initiative of Pakistan. According to the information available from official quarters concerned, the 47th OIC Council of Foreign Ministers meeting held in last week of November 2020 in Niamey, Niger, a Pakistan-led resolution on Islamophobia was unanimously adopted. The resolution among other things authorized the OIC Permanent Missions in New York to jointly table a resolution in the UN General Assembly for designating March 15 as the "International Day to Combat Islamophobia", urged the OIC Member States to organize and support various high-visibility events aimed at effectively increasing awareness at all levels about curbing Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred, reaffirmed that desecration of the Holy Quran and reprinting of caricatures of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) were not legitimate expression of the right of freedom of expression and opinion under

international human rights law, called on the OIC Secretary General to continue monitoring the phenomenon of Islamophobia by strengthening the scope of Islamophobia Observatory and taking necessary steps for building a common position of the Muslim Ummah on this issue and also called upon the UN Secretary General to initiate a global dialogue on countering rising Islamophobia and promoting inter-faith harmony. In accordance with the mandate given by the OIC Council of Foreign Ministers, Pakistan is continuously pursuing quite actively with other Islamic countries and UN Member States to table an OIC Resolution at the UN General Assembly on "International Day to Combat Islamophobia".

Furthermore, Pakistan also joined the OIC Group in New York only last month i.e. March 2021 to commemorate the OIC-designated International Day to Combat Islamophobia. Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi owing to prevailing third wave of epidemic of COVID-19 contributed a video statement to this even in addition of his message also during second week of March 2021 regarding the OIC-designated International Day to Combat Islamophobia. Needless to say that as pledged by the Prime Minister, Pakistan will continue to utilize all available avenues at the bilateral and multi-lateral levels to persistently and effectively keep countering Islamophobia. It is a long drawn battle. But a beginning in the right direction in a positive manner has been made at the initiative of Pakistan.

The continuous efforts by entire Muslim Ummah in this regard may start showing some signs of impact here and there sooner or later, please. Pakistan's missions and embassies abroad particularly in the western countries also need to be actively involved in inter-action with intelligentsia, public leaders, media people and elected representatives telling them repeatedly emphatically that if holocaust is not mentioned and talked about in the West, Islamophobia is not acceptable by the Muslim Ummah and believers are ready to die rather than withstanding blasphemy by anyone in respect of their most respected and

Stumbling roadblocks

ERSHAD MAHMUD

Since India and Pakistan have finally embarked on the path of reconciliation and dialogue, it is time to reflect upon and identify the major roadblocks which have the potential to hinder forward movement once again.

These hurdles include: a top-down approach, limited infrastructure for peace-building and, more importantly, the absence of Kashmiri representation and limited support of all the stakeholders. It is a sad reality that, despite periodic engagement in dialogue, both India and Pakistan have remained unable to yield any tangible results, particularly in the context of the Kashmir dispute and Siachen. In the present circumstances, it is imperative to find the key entry points which might help both countries initiate a continuous, uninterrupted and insulated dialogue process, ensuring the involvement of all stakeholders in the process including the political and civil society representatives.

A major obstacle is the tendency of a top-down approach. Most of the time, the top leadership initiates talks which is a top-down approach, with its own limitations. The civil-military bureaucracy plays a vital role in constructing the contours of the dialogue process which is conservative in terms of generating fresh thinking and is also averse to new ideas for the engagements. A well thought-out and properly structured peace process, involving citizens and multi-layer stakeholders, has not been formulated so far. Additionally, seven decades-long acrimony and rifts among the leaders resulted in the creation of some permanent infrastructures meant to undermine and compete with each other at the diplomatic level for economic gains.

Secondly, the institutional structures for the peace process have not been created so far; these could have served as a platform for dialogue and cooperation. Instead of creating institutions to promote dialogue and reconciliation, prevent conflict and enable mediation; heavy investment is made to prevent each other's socio-political growth and damage international standing.

Third, several accounts acknowledged the significant role played by the secret backchannel set up by the two governments to resolve contentious issues and find a common ground for the settlement of the Kashmir issue during 2004-2008. However, the delay in the pronouncement of what was agreed on made it redundant as the altered political environment in both countries

made it infeasible to make things public. Fourth, several dialogues and even summit meetings hit a dead end quickly because these were not mutually planned and well-designed, and there was no strategy to contain backlash in case of failure. Conversely, both New Delhi and Islamabad tried to outmaneuver each other at all meetings instead of focusing on resolving the contentious issues. Regrettably, politics was played to address the domestic audience and larger regional interests were conveniently compromised.

For instance, in July 2009, on the side-lines of a Non-Aligned Movement summit in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, then Indian PM Manmohan Singh acknowledged Pakistan's apprehension about alleged Indian involvement in insurgency reported in Balochistan. Likewise, in July 2015; the prime ministers of India and Pakistan, on the side-lines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in the Russian city of Ufa, issued a joint statement which outlined the future course of action to normalize bilateral relations; they mentioned that both sides should strive to combat terrorism. Pakistani media and politicians accused the then PM Nawaz Sharif of accepting Indian terms by including the term 'terrorism' in the joint statement, without mentioning Kashmir in particular. Almost all the meetings of the Indian and Pakistani leaders are intensely followed by their respective media which largely promotes the traditional narrative, often led by ex-government officials who are generally driven by the popularity syndrome instead of balanced thinking. The media has thus made it virtually impossible for the political leadership to think creatively to find new ways of engagement. In this background, both countries have to carefully manage their domestic media, besides ensuring solid support from the opposition parties.

Last but not least, since the LoC ceasefire implemented on February 25, Kashmir has not witnessed any respite in violence or state-led repression. Thousands of Kashmiris are still in jails or under house arrest despite the growing danger of the Covid-19 pandemic. The dialogue process between India and Pakistan cannot yield the desired results unless the Kashmir Valley witnesses some noticeable changes such as the release of prisoners, exercising zero tolerance to human rights violations and creating space for political activities run by people with all shades of political attachments and opinions.

