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Anatomy of agitations in Kashmir

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ABSTRACT

The protests that broke out after the elimination of HM Commander Burhan Wani on 08 July 2016 took the State and security establishment by surprise and caught them completely off guard. This unrest was qualitatively different from previous protests in terms of intensity, scale, and the nature of public participation. Since then there has been a substantial increase in violent incidents and fatalities through the rest of the year especially in the Kashmir Valley. A debate has also been started in public domain about the need to remove article 370 so that rest of the Indians could invest, purchase property or settle down in J & K. The situation in Kashmir Valley has been going through intermittent phases of stability and turmoil. This present cycle of protests and agitations is however disconcerting. The two most alarming aspects of the current phase of Kashmir's agitational terrorism are the rise in the number of local terrorists, and the growing acceptance and legitimacy of terrorists in society. The situation has been exploited fully by Pakistan with an impetus to cross border terrorism and continued support to the separatist movement.

Keywords— Agitation, Terrorism, Pakistan, J&K

1. INTRODUCTION

The protests that broke out after the elimination of HM Commander Burhan Wani on 08 July 2016 took the State and security establishment by surprise and caught them completely off guard. This unrest was qualitatively different from previous protests in terms of intensity, scale, and the nature of public participation. Since then there was a substantial increase in violent incidents and fatalities in the Kashmir Valley. As per the Director General of Police (Law and Order) S P Vaid, a total of 2,380 'law and order incidents' were reported during the 'Kashmir unrest', since 08 July 2016. Of these, at least 820 incidents were reported in July, which came down to 747 in August, 535 in September, 179 in October, 73 in November and 25 during the first 19 days of December.[1] The protests, which were initially spontaneous, were exploited by vested interests including separatists and Pakistan based terrorist groups like Lashkar e Taiba and thereafter orchestrated into anti-national and anti-Security Forces campaign. Unlike in previous years, rural areas were at the centre stage of protests and many interior areas, especially in South Kashmir, became a 'no go' area for state machinery. Since then, the high No of causalities and conditions of many injured in the hospitals have further evoked angry sentiments amongst the public. Allegations about the use of excessive force by JKP/SF (especially use of pellets), has also encouraged the youth to attack the posts and target the personnel of the Security Forces. Extensive damage has been caused to public property by rampaging mobs. Just as in previous agitations of 2010, most of the protesters were in the age gap of 15-25 years. They directly confront security forces and challenge their authority forcing them to use crowd control measures. During interviews with the families by an independent NGO, Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation, it came across that the fathers of those killed were low-income families such as farmers, labourers, tailors, vendors, blacksmiths, carpenters, bakers, lower rung government employees and small businessmen. Almost all the mothers interviewed during the course of data collection were homemakers.[2] Separatist leadership, which presented a United Front, also played a major role in instigating the locals through their provincial leaders/ grass root cadres. The separate parties of APHC (G) under Syed Geelani, APHC(M) under Mirwaiz Umar and JKLF under Yasin Malik with long-standing differences came together and formed Joint resistance leadership (JRL).[3] Although separatists leadership claimed that it has no control over the 'Spontaneous' mobs, their workers were at the forefront in org protests. The APHC (G), APHC(M), JKLF exploited the unrest and jointly issued bandh calls which aggravated the situation. The Separatists were presented with an opportunity which they are keen to encash. Grassroots Network of socio-religious organisations like Jamaat e Islami was also instrumental in mobilizing crowds and encouraging protests. The biggest contribution to the provocation came from local Masjids/ Imams who through sermons on loudspeakers instigated locals with provocative slogans. The reasons for Masjids to play such a provocative role could range from ideological motivation to separatists instructions. In many places such as Srinagar, posters/ leaflets were placed in Masjids by unknown persons exhorting locals to continue with protests/ bandhs indefinitely.[4] Some observers claim that stone pelters and protesters were attracted by the monetary incentives promised to them by the separatists.[5] A major fall out of the agitations has been the impact on the common people who have faced the brunt of hardships. As per some estimates, Economy and industrial loss during the agitation in 2016 was over 16000 Crores.[6] Even the schools

remained closed thus severely affecting the next generation and exposing them to the harsh realities of living in a conflict zone. It was no surprise that even the school and college going children started participating in the stone pelting. There were many incidents of burning of schools by anti-social elements which gave birth to many conspiracy theories.[7] The latest round of agitations has once again raised the uncomfortable question of responsibility and accountability. Who needs to be blamed for the current impasse?

2. WHAT DRIVES AGITATIONS?

Although Burhan Wani's encounter was the immediate trigger, these protests were, in fact, an outpouring of anger over a series of issues which had contributed to the perceived alienation of locals. These included the formation of the "unholy" BJP-PDP ruling dispensation and its perceived anti-Kashmir policies like Sainik Colonies issue, the status of Kashmiri Pandits, allegations of demographic change etc. Kashmir Valley continues to be troubled by protests on almost a daily basis. Throughout 2018, there are invariably protests during the encounters between terrorists and security forces. The funerals of killed terrorists are attended by large crowds and are followed by spontaneous shutdowns in the area. There are protests even on issues of governance. As per observers, in most of the protests which break out in Valley nowadays, while the initial wave of protests is spontaneous and directionless, the subsequent build-up is provoked and orchestrated at the local level. It is therefore evident that within Kashmir, most of the concerns of the local population remain unaddressed. There has also been a renewed effort by separatist leaders of APHC (G), APHC (M), other constituents of Hurriyat Conference, JKLF and other subversive civil society organisations to expand their influence. These efforts have resulted in adversely influencing the perceptions and opinions of locals, thereby resulting in the anti-government outlook of locals. The separatists are also now making extensive attempts to enlarge their sphere of influence to Chenab Valley and Pir Panjal region which has a significant Muslim population. It is an indicator of the failure of Indian State that leaders of Hurriyat conference who had lost credibility amongst the public have got a fresh lease of life after 2008 mindset are now regaining the lost ground. Today local leaders have gone on record threatening to "pick up another flag if their concerns regarding article 35A are not addressed". There is clearly a trust deficit. Political grievances of a section of Kashmiri population which sees Indian rule as an impediment to their political aspirations are the basic reason for the chasm between Kashmir and rest of the country. Economic deprivation resulting from lack of development, severe governance deficit and government apathy is also a major factor in the alienation of locals. Unemployed and disgruntled youth are also an easy target for exploitation by terrorist organizations and radical elements.

The prolonged deployment of security forces in the Kashmir valley is also seen as intrusive by the local population. Areas of Kupwara and Baramulla where separatists were finding difficult to elicit a favourable response from locals are also now witnessing an increase in protests. [8] The police are routinely targeted by the stone pelters almost on a daily basis and are bearing the brunt of protests along with CRPF.[9] Stone-pelting on security forces near the encounter sites has been causing major operational problems for the law enforcing agencies over the past year. More than half a dozen youth have been killed in such incidents in the first quarter of this year. As per reports, nearly 300 WhatsApp groups were being used to mobilize stone-pelters in J & K to disrupt security forces' operations at the encounter sites. Police official said that each of these WhatsApp groups had around 250 members while explaining how determined attempts were being made to disrupt the operations of the security forces by mobilizing stone-pelting mobs at the encounter sites.[10]

3. IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. are being exploited for preaching separatist ideologies in Kashmir. Posts and articles related to 'Pro-Azadi' sentiment, pictures of slain militants, protests, demonstrations and human rights abuses by SF dominate the social media landscape in J&K. Unlike the terrorists of 90s, Kashmir's new crop of terrorists, and, the anti-India elements are social media warriors on WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter. It is common knowledge that many fake accounts are being run in the name of locals in order to promote anti-India feelings. [11] A background note on the Government assessment of agitation in 2016 shared with all the political parties blamed the use of social media for spreading rumours and instigating youth to participate in violent protests. In August 2017, Central Government requested social Networking site Twitter to block over 100 accounts in Kashmir for propagating hatred and subversive feelings. [12] As an outcome of an investigation into unrest in Kashmir, National Investigation Agency (NIA) identified 117 suspects who allegedly passed instructions to stone pelters, using WhatsApp groups to spread disinformation and pass necessary instructions. NIA along with JKP also identified over 6000 mobile numbers across various parts of the state who were part of 79 WhatsApp groups. These groups such as "Pulwama rebels", "Tehreek e Azadi 123", "Freedom fighters", "Al Jihad", "Mujahideen-e-Islam" etc. were instrumental in mobilising crowds to the designated areas of protests.[13]

4. ROLE OF MAINSTREAM MEDIA

The ultra-nationalist coverage on National Media has further antagonized the local population as they feel that the narrative on national media is biased and unfair towards Kashmiris. Even when the Kashmir Valley was besieged by devastating floods in 2014, mainstream media was accused of turning the humanitarian relief operations into a PR exercise for the Indian Army.[14] The prime time debates on National media often results in generalisation and vilification of Kashmiris thus drifting them away from the national mainstream. In contrast, vernacular media has been extremely provocative and critical of actions of SF. These two contrasting narratives have vitiated the environment and stoked further tensions. [15]

5. STATE RESPONSE TO AGITATION

Operational environment for the security forces in Kashmir Valley is becoming increasingly complex due to changing agitation dynamics. The exploitation of social media by the terrorist-separatist nexus and constant media glare has only accentuated the issue. In a lot of places in the Valley, locals come out in large numbers and interfere in operations forcing security forces to divert a large part of their effort towards controlling the crowds. In such scenarios, there are large chances of collateral damage providing a trigger for further agitation. To the credit of security forces, they have by and large managed to cope up with this worrying trend though at times it means the use of high handed techniques.

The intensity and scale of violence during the 2018 agitation admittedly left very few options for the law and order agencies. Severe restrictions, preventive deployment and use of Force became the norm of the day. This led many analysts to argue that India tackles insurgency in Kashmir Valley in the same way as the governments deal with allegations of external subversion, brute force and unlawful machinations.[16] The statement of Chief Of the Army Staff General Bipin Rawat “I wish these people, instead of throwing stones at us, were firing weapons at us. Then I would have been happy. Then I could do what I (want to do).” demonstrates the predicament of Security Forces. At times the restraint observed by the troops is not enough to deal with protests and they have to resort to harsh measures. [17] There is a day to day stories and eye witness accounts of Security Forces going berserk, ruthlessly dealing with protesters and damaging private property to teach local population a lesson.[18] Some of these stories may have been exaggerated and deliberately spread to discredit the security forces. The J and K police, in particular, is very unpopular with people in Kashmir and have been time and again accused of resorting to brute and harsh methods of dealing with the public. Though the Police has done a remarkable job in intelligence generation and neutralisation of terrorists, allegations of rampant corruption, arbitrary use of authority and routine harassment of locals against the police personnel are increasing. The use of pellet guns and a large number of injuries caused due to them in 2016 was adversely reported in media across the globe and severely dented India’s claims of being a champion of Human rights. [19]

The use of Public Safety Act by the Police to arrest key instigators and keep trouble makers out of circulation, despite being a very effective method was projected as yet another case of government’s high handedness. Over five hundred individuals were detained under PSA, an act which allows the law enforcement agencies to keep a person in custody without trial for a period of six months. The act, though draconian, is considered by the Police as the most effective way of dealing with Over Groundworkers. However, as per social scientist Prof Noor Ahmad, “The way the government is responding makes it seem like it is at war with the people of Kashmir.” [20] The angry protests and demonstrations are seen by many as essentially a reflection of deep-rooted uncertainty. Despite the criticism in some quarters about excessive use of force, most of the people in the rest of the country favour use of strict measures in dealing with protesters.[21] Images of mobs attacking soldiers and damaging properties in Kashmir has led to this hardening of outlook and in Mainland India. To the credit of Government, it has taken several steps to alleviate the grievances of the local population. On 23 Nov 17, CM Ms Mehbooba Mufti announced the withdrawal of FIRs for the first time offenders in cases of stone pelting. [22] The government has also announced a grant of Rs five lakh to next of kin of 76 people who had died in firing by Security forces in 2016 Agitation. In addition, there have been several attempts to reach out to the local population. HM Rajnath Singh visited the state twice while an all-party delegation also travelled to the State without much success [23]. Since a semblance of normalcy was restored in 2017, the State Government has also embarked on an outreach programme spearheaded personally by CM Mehbooba Mufti. Several economic initiatives such as regularisation of casual workers, the announcement of infrastructure projects etc. have been taken.[24] However, what is worrying is that despite such measures many sections of society refused to reciprocate and throughout 2018 there is no let down in the Anti-establishment and Anti-national feelings. In fact, local recruitment into terrorist outfits is witnessing new highs.

6. CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that a lot of individuals in the Country believe that people of Kashmir should not constantly complain and reciprocate the benefits and confidence-building measures taken by the Government. Street violence and unwarranted playing of “victim” card only undermine their case. A debate has also been started in public domain about the need to remove article 370 so that rest of the Indians could invest, purchase property or settle down in J & K. The situation in Kashmir Valley has been going through intermittent phases of stability and turmoil. This present cycle of protests and agitations is however disconcerting. The two most alarming aspects of the current phase of Kashmir’s agitational terrorism are the rise in the number of local terrorists, and the growing acceptance and legitimacy of terrorists in society. The situation has been exploited fully by Pakistan with an impetus to cross border terrorism and continued support to the separatist movement. The moot question is how significant is Pakistan’s role in shaping the current environment in the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

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