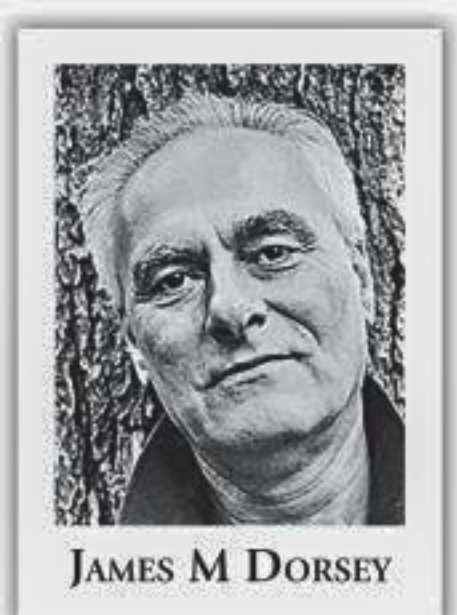


Islamists march on the Pakistani capital



JAMES M DORSEY

PAKISTAN, long viewed as an incubator of religious militancy, is gearing up for a battle over the future of the country's notorious madrassas, religious seminaries accused of breeding radicalism.

Islamist-led protests also threaten to be a fight for the future of the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan.

The stakes for both the government and multiple Islamist and opposition parties and groups are high.

Pakistan earlier this month evaded blacklisting by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an international anti-money laundering and terrorism finance watchdog, but only by the skin of its teeth.

Maintaining Pakistan on it grey list since June of last year, FATF warned the South Asian nation that it would be blacklisted if it failed to fully implement an agreed plan to halt the flow of funds to militant groups by February of next year when the watchdog holds its next meeting.

The warning was reinforced by a statement by FATF's Chinese President, Xiangmin Liu. China has long shielded Pakistan from blacklisting.

"Pakistan needs to do more and faster. Pakistan's failure to fulfil FATF global standards is an issue that we take very seriously. If by February 2020, Pakistan doesn't make significant progress, it will be put on the blacklist," Mr Xiangmin said.

Pakistani officials acknowledged that Mr Xiangmin's comment underlined the seriousness of their country's predicament but said it would serve as an incentive to push forward.

That is likely to energise Islamist opposition to Pakistani efforts to comply with FATF demands that would impose strict oversight on their funding and financing of social and cultural activities, including the operation of tens of thousands of religious seminaries.

A five-party Islamist coalition that demands "true Islamisation" and the establishment of shariah law, led by Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the 66-year old head of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam and a former member of parliament, organised a countrywide march scheduled to converge on the capital Islamabad on October 31.

Mr Rehman said the march of up to one million people was a declaration of "war" against Mr Khan's government. He demanded the government's resignation. His protest is likely to secure a degree of support from other major opposition parties like the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N).

With government efforts to engage the opposition in talks to fend off the march on Islamabad going nowhere, both Pakistani security forces and stick-wielding Islamist volunteers clad in yellow uniform-like garb have been preparing for the march. Security forces have virtually sealed off Islamabad's government district.

The government is also considering closing roads leading to the capital and banning media coverage.

Pakistani media reported that authorities



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PHOTO: AFP

were also contemplating digging ditches along footpaths leading to Islamabad to prevent protesters from circumventing roadblocks by foot.

The Islamists were further energised by a controversial meeting last month on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly between Mr Khan and George Soros, the billionaire philanthropist behind the Open Society Foundation. The foundation was banned from Pakistan in late 2017 as part of a crackdown on non-governmental organisations.

Mr Soros, a Hungarian-born Jew who survived the Holocaust, and the foundation are globally in the bull's eye of populist, ultra-nationalist and militant religious opposition to what they term "globalists" and "cosmopolitans."

The attacks, like in the case of the Islamist coalition in Pakistan as well as Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban and other nationalist and far-right forces, often take on

anti-Semitic connotations.

Mr Orban, who studied on a scholarship provided by Mr Soros' philanthropy, has charged the billionaire with secretly plotting to flood Hungary with migrants and destroy it as a nation.

Mr Rehman, accusing Mr Khan of being a "Jewish agent," was particularly irked by the fact that the prime minister was believed to have asked Mr Soros to assist in reforming Pakistani madrassas in a bid to counter radicalisation and ensure that the seminaries adopt curricula approved by the ministry of education.

Greater government control of the seminaries would substantially weaken the significant street power of Islamist parties that often fare poorly in elections.

The emerging power struggle between Mr Khan and the Islamists is in many ways an effort by the Islamists to force the military that long supported them to choose between them and the prime minister.

Mr Khan is believed to have had military support in the electoral campaign that brought the former cricket player to office on a promise to end corruption and improve living standards.

Instead, a persistent economic crisis forced Mr Khan to agree to a USD six billion bailout by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that involves stark austerity measures.

The Islamists' ability to march on Islamabad has some analysts suggesting that they would not be able to do so without at least a military nod.

Whatever the case, the march could not come at a more awkward moment for Mr Khan.

Mr Rehman hopes to capitalise on popular discontent as Pakistan struggles to overcome the economic crisis and seems unable to garner substantial international and Muslim support in condemning India's withdrawal of the disputed area of Kashmir's autonomy.

Earlier this week, police in Islamabad employed water cannons to disperse teachers protesting the fact that they had not been paid for months.

Complicating affairs is the fact that solving the economic crisis, confronting India in the dispute about Kashmir and meeting FATF's demands are all intertwined.

Militants and others have degrees of financial manoeuvrability because much of the Pakistani economy remains unrecorded. In addition, despite crackdowns, various militant groups like Jamaat-ud-Dawa and Jaish-e-Mohammed remain useful proxies in battles over Kashmir. All of which mitigates against full compliance with FATF's demands.

That is the murky playground in which Mr Rehman and his Islamist alliance is seeking to stir the pot.

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The emerging power struggle between Mr Khan and the Islamists is in many ways an effort by the Islamists to force the military that long supported them to choose between them and the prime minister.

Today's mantra must be 'nutrition per calorie'

ZAKARIA KHONDKER

A deep understanding of how the brain works is essential in order to limit our health footprint through everyday choices. With a better understanding of impulsivity and short termism we can reorient ourselves to enhance our lifestyles. Modern imaging techniques show the gradual build-up of human brain from reptilian to mammalian to humanoid. At the bottom sits the survivalist reptilian core that serves the vital functions—heartbeat, breathing, body temperature and balance. Survival through crude power and violence without remorse or forethought is its function; it will hijack the body when it sees survival threat. This brain also distastes failures, which in the evolutionary past mostly meant instant death. Mindless violence at the heat of the moment, sudden outburst of anger, or addiction are classic examples of brain hijack.

In the evolutionary past, when starvation was the norm, mindless binge eating to fill the body with concentrated calories increased chances of survival. To our reptilian brain concentrated calorie is highly satisfying and tasty. In today's world where calorie starvation is exception, not the norm, this tendency has become a disadvantage. Human brains could evolve and adapt over thousands of generations if food abundance continues to be the norm. In the meantime, we face an uphill battle in this era of food factories that can refine food, which appeal to our core brain. This core brain derives

immense pleasure from those "tasty" refined foods devoid of nutrient diversity. Fortunately, we can restrain ourselves from falling into this trap by consciously shifting our thinking paradigm and retraining our baby taste buds to like nutritional diversity over refined calories.

Defeatism is perhaps the first thing we need to defeat. Our core brain



PHOTO: STAR GRAPHICS

instinctively brushes off new ideas. To this brain, change seems dangerous: failure is death, success is survival. Our caveman instinct prefers clinging to any shred of evidence or look for exceptions as examples to preserve the status quo, no matter how fragile that evidence is.

Calorie not volume, is how human body goes when it uses energy for

daily living. A tablespoon of oil or 2 tablespoons of sugar have the same energy for human body as a cup of vegetables or a bowl of green leaves. We need to rethink; consciously, we need to retrain our thoughts so that a large bowl of vegetables feels like the same amount of food as a cup of milk or rice.

Nutrition per calorie must be today's mantra. We can consider food

fruits, beans, mushroom, onions, seeds on the other hand are nutrient dense, supplying us with vitamins, minerals, fibres, and phytochemicals (plant chemicals). We associate rich food with empty calories, like *biryani*. Can we not see food as they are in the nutrition value chain: *biryani* as poor food and vegetables as rich food? Empty calories like sugar, fat, or alcohol dilute nutrition, are weakening the body's protection. Rich food should be rich in nutrition, with high aggregate nutrition density index (ANDI) value. Empty calories are devalued food, poor food, devoid of nutrition.

Starvation needs another dimension today, incorporating twenty first century knowledge. Traditionally, the poor were skinny and starved to death as they could not afford the needed calories. More people die today from over-eating empty calories than its shortage. Another group of poor emerged with abundance of cheap empty calories in the form of industrial processed food and hectic lifestyle. Despite having enough money they are starving in nutrition.

Retraining baby taste buds has never been so challenging with busier parents, shrinking family sizes, and commercials bombarding our children with poor empty calorie foods that appeal to baby taste buds. Babies need a lot of calories and growth hormone to grow fast in early years. As we grow older, we need more nutrient rich food. Retraining the taste buds is essential, as we do with learning how to walk—through practice and stumbles along the way. Once retrained they will enjoy

the rich flavour and texture of nutrition and slow burning fibre rich calories that benefit health. Exposing children to more (nutrition) rich food in early age can help.

Empty calorie addition is another challenge we face. Empty calories stimulate the same pleasure centre in our brains as alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, or heroin. If stopping empty calories for few days causes flulike symptoms, tremor, restlessness or strong craving, you are likely addicted. This is the same problem drug addicts are facing. Stopping can be a challenge, needing strong resolve or slow guided withdrawal.

Mouth-watering "tasty" food directly appeal to our core survivalist brain and in the past—when death and disease from calorie starvation was the norm—this was acceptable. Today nutrition starvation is the norm, affecting two billion people globally. A deep and broad cultural shift is needed to steer the social behaviour towards healthier, joyful and productive directions. I am yet to meet a person who enjoys being diabetic, hypertensive, or having serious chronic health issues. Nutrition rich food should be the rich treats in social gatherings and parties, not nutrition poor treats full of empty calories filled with refined sugar, fat, and salt. We must work towards enhancing and extending a healthy productive life; from this we can benefit ourselves and it will also relieve unnecessary social and economic burdens on us—a charity to ourselves, our loved ones, and to the public.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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 - 20 Unpleasant, as details
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 - 24 "DO -- others ..."
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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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