



Prison Breaks in Pakistan: Actors, Motives and Implications

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Soon after the May 2013 elections, it was hoped that the domestic political dynamics would settle in Pakistan and the Nawaz Sharif government would put in motion a slew of measures to address extremists-led violence. However, the recent attacks on government officials, public, and foreign tourists have shown the continuing trends of extremism in the country. At the end of July 2013, when the country was still in the process of electing its new President, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants launched a massive attack on a prison in one of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's oldest and largest central jail, located in the city of Dera Ismail Khan, freeing more than 250 inmates, including 35 hardcore militants, who were affiliated to the banned TTP and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). This was another successful and meticulously planned attack by Taliban and it raises serious questions about the state's capacity to combat a domestic insurgency that has killed thousands of security personnel and civilians. This attack has highlighted one of the major domestic security challenges that Pakistan faces today.

Dera Ismail Khan is located close to the South Waziristan's tribal region, which is the main sanctuary for Taliban and al-Qaida militants in the country. The attack in the city showcased the ability of the al-Qaeda linked Pakistani Taliban to hit at the heart of Pakistan's heavily guarded prison system and run away with senior Taliban fighters and commanders. TTP claimed responsibility for the attack and their spokesman Shahidullah Shahid confirmed that 100 gunmen and seven suicide bombers had been sent to the prison to free the group's leaders.

Among the inmates freed were two local Taliban commanders, Abdul Hakim and Haji Ilyas. Also Waleed Akbar, a sectarian militant and the principle suspect in the last year's attacks on Shia mourners in Dera Ismail Khan, during the Shia mourning month of Moharram, escaped. Interestingly, these militants in police uniforms used megaphones to call out the names of specific prisoners, they wanted to free. Later, police claimed that fourteen fugitives were re-arrested.

This incident underlines the continuing weakness of security agencies responsible for maintaining law and order and countering violent extremism in the troubled state. Security forces were totally unprepared for the raid, despite senior prison officials having received intelligence indicating an attack was likely to take place. Officials blamed a combination of negligence and lack of communication among Pakistan's many security agencies; but some suggested that there may have been a degree of insider help, too.

This is second large-scale attack by militants on central jail in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Earlier, in April 2012, militants had attacked central prison in neighbouring Bannu district, freeing 400 inmates, including Adnan Rashid, a former Pakistan Air force official, who later joined TTP, and was the master-mind behind the assassination attempt on former president General Pervez Musharraf. It is assumed that the latest attack, on the prison in Dera ismail Khan, was also masterminded by Adnan Rashid. After the attack, in a conversation with the popular local daily '*Dawn*', Adnan told that he had been planning the attack since months, which was aimed to set free commanders of six of the banned organisation from Quetta. He further stated that the attack, costing Rs 10 million, was carried out successfully and that 35 of their freed associates had safely reached Mir Ali in North Waziristan tribal region. It is a conjuncture that there could be a possible connection between freeing of these Taliban militants and the attack on the Indian Army personnel in Poonch on August 05, 2013 along the Line of Control (LoC) in which 5 Indian soldiers have been killed, since these two incidents took place back to back.

It seems that no lessons were learnt from the past attack in Bannu and the incident of Dera Ismail Khan was waiting to happen. Some analysts have suggested the ambivalent position taken towards the Taliban by some high-profile Pakistani politicians which might have

emboldened the militants. The current PTI-led government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has adopted a soft approach towards the militants. Its head Imran Khan said, negotiating with the extremists was the only way to end violence in the restive western border zones. The federal government is also ambiguous in its stand on Taliban and is more focused on solving energy crisis and other problems. Apart from shifting blame to the provincial government, there is no clear cut policy on counter terrorism. If linkages between freeing of Taliban militants and attack on Indian soldiers are true, it is a cause of concern for India.

Other countries are also facing prison breaks, in which militant groups have been able to free their fellow combatants. For instance, more than 1100 militants were freed from the Kofiya prison in Benghazi, Libya, on July 27, 2013. In another incident, hundreds of convicts, including senior members of al-Qaeda, broke out of Iraq's Abu Ghraib and Taji jails, on July 22, 2013, as their comrades launched a military-style assault to free them.

Interpol has issued a global security alert in connection with suspected al-Qaida involvement in several recent prison escapes including those in Iraq, Libya and Pakistan. In the past, the Afghani Taliban had carried out an audacious jail raid near Kandahar in Afghanistan in April 2011, freeing at least 470 prisoners, including Taliban commanders and fighters.

The prison break incidents are likely to undermine the fledging Nawaz Sharif government and the opposition is likely to make mileage of this. The government will also be under pressure from external actors such as the US as they prepare to withdraw from Afghanistan.

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