



RELEASE OF HAFIZ SAEED HAS MORE THAN SYMBOLIC COROLLARIES FOR PAKISTAN



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Hafiz Saeed, chief of Jamaat-ud-Dawa (JuD), and a UN, US and India designated terrorist, was released from house arrest after a three member judicial review board in Punjab turned down Pakistan government's request for the extension of the duration of his detention. Hafiz Saeed and his four aides, Abdullah Ubaid, Malik Zafar Iqbal, Abdul Rehman Abid and Qazi Kasif Hussian were detained in January 2017 by the Punjab government for 90 days under the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997 and the Fourth Schedule of the Anti-Terrorism Act (*NDTV*, November 24, 2017). Saeed's spokesman, Yahya Mujahid, called his release a 'victory of truth'. Soon after his release, the Mumbai (26/11) mastermind Saeed cut a 'freedom cake' and gave an hour long Friday sermon at the Jamaat-ud-Dawa headquarters in Lahore, where his supporters gathered to offer him a warm welcome by showering rose petals. Saeed, as usual, steered anti-India rhetoric in his sermon. He slammed Nawaz Sharif, called him a traitor who wants peace with India, and vowed to continue his actions in Kashmir.

Interestingly, the release came soon after the US Congress decided to drop action against Lashkar-e-Taiba as a pre-condition for grant of US assistance to Pakistan. The move to drop action against LeT contradicted with the US stance on terrorism and Trump's Afghan policy announcement, which carried unfaltering warnings to Pakistan. US is clearly flustered on Saeed's release and the White house has warned of serious repercussions to the US-Pakistan relations as a fallout of the release.

New Delhi is outraged, has expressed deep disappointment, and sees Saeed's release as "an attempt by the Pakistani system to 'mainstream proscribed terrorists'". Islamabad's action has indeed added to the existing mistrust between the two nuclear armed neighbours.

During the period of his house arrest, Saeed's organization, Jamaat-ud-Dawa, despite being on the 'government's watch list' and 'facing sanctions under the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA)', announced the creation of its political arm – Milli Muslim League (MML) (*The Nation*, September 27, 2017). The Ministry of Interior, with the Election Commission of Pakistan, opposed the registration of MML in mainstream politics on the grounds that it would 'breed violence and extremism in politics' (*The Nation*, Sep 27, 2017).

The MML, despite being ineligible, openly contested by-elections in NA-120 (Lahore) and NA-4 (Peshawar). In the NA-120 by-election, MML bagged the third position and MML's Yaqoob Sheikh bagged 5,822 votes contesting amongst political parties established for decades now. This is significant as MML was not only not recognized, it lacked the structure and organisation of a political party and also did not have time to prepare for the elections.

Pakistan did not make a case against Hafiz Saeed and no formal charges were filed against him, although, in a symbolic move, the preventive detention was extended multiple times to avoid international limelight and US scrutiny. And, not to forget, that Saeed was under house arrest in his own comfortable residence, which did not restrict him too much from his routine actions and decision making.

Although Saeed's arrest was more symbolic than anything else, his release certainly has actual corollaries which would be useful to analyse:

1. Pakistan has strongly believed in the policy of extending support to extremist militant groups, not only to conduct its foreign policy (vis-à-vis India and Afghanistan) but also to garner control over internal political and social dynamics. Pakistan military and its intelligence agency have long relied on extremist groups to tighten their grip on internal policies and dominate the political stage. Hafiz Saeed, Pakistan's 'strategic asset', has always enjoyed the patronage of the military and the power centre does see Saeed as a strong support, internally, to manage the ruling political party PML (N), and externally, to continue their objectives in Kashmir. Islamabad clearly does not want to alter its strategic calculus and its support to terror as a policy tool would continue.
2. The US has been harsh and blunt in its messaging to Pakistan, opposing its policy of supporting terrorism. Although Islamabad reacted strongly to Trump's remarks but its actions seem to be less affected by the US warnings. This could be attributed largely to two

factors – its deepening strategic and economic alliance with Beijing, which offers unconditional support to Islamabad under any circumstances and its reduced reliance on the US over the last few years.

3. Saeed's release, ahead of the 2018 elections, would imply MML's structured role in mainstream politics. Not only MML, but also Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP), launched by Khadim Hussain Rizvi, one of the self-proclaimed Bareilvi scholars, who used Mumtaz Qadri's execution as a platform to launch his political party and managed to swing a sizeable numbers of votes in Peshawar and Lahore. The two parties together managed to gather around 26,000 votes in both the elections. Retired Army generals have confirmed military's backing to these groups. This indicates a dangerous development in Pakistani politics, where the release of Saeed confirms political mainstreaming of jihadi groups who will now not only be military's proxies in conducting their policies in the neighbourhood, but would have a role in the domestic politics, at par with the mainstream political parties- PML-N and PPP.
4. Nawaz Sharif's departure, and now Saeed's release, reaffirms military's control over judicial strings and diminishing power of democracy in Pakistan.
5. Saeed's release also indicates a serious development in Pakistan's polarized society towards acceptance of the role of jihadi groups. Although the military is seeing this as fulfilling its own interest, this would further damage the country's ability to fight extremism and violence.
6. Prospects of alteration in Pakistan's behavior and normalization of relations with New Delhi further weaken with jihadi groups having a say in Pakistan's national decision making in the future.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

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