

THE terms of surrender may not have been made public but the capitulation could not have been more humiliating. There was nothing surprising about the government succumbing to a lawless brigade. The writ of the state has yet again crumbled in the face of violent extremism. After two weeks of blowing hot and cold, the PTI government has apparently signed on the dotted line. It is the seventh time in the past five years that the Tehreek-i-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) has brought the state to its knees. Each time it has returned more empowered.

The group that does not have any representation in the national parliament and has been proscribed as a terrorist outfit seeks to determine the country's political and ideological course. The little-known Barelvi militant outfit saw its rise after its first siege of the capital in 2017. It was the civil-military divide, and not its popular mass support, that turned it into a force to be reckoned with.

A few thousand zealots led by a foul-mouthed cleric virtually paralysed Islamabad for more than three weeks. A troubled civilian administration was rendered helpless because of the alleged support of the intelligence agencies for the mob. Justice Qazi Isa's damning ruling in the 2017 sit-in case sheds some light on the role of the intelligence agencies and some political leaders in encouraging the mob in order to weaken the then federal government. An oversight in a bill passed by parliament was used to whip up religious sentiments.

A besieged PML-N government was forced to accept the demands of the protesters that also included the resignation of the then federal law minister. The engineered anti-government protest empowered the radical Barelvi clerics. The siege of Islamabad also saw the rise of the TLP as a major religio-political force. It galvanised Barelvi militancy.

Curiously, the sectarian outfit that preached violence in the name of faith was allowed to participate in the 2018 elections. Although it didn't win any National Assembly seat it emerged as the fourth largest bloc in Punjab in terms of the share of votes. Political machinations legitimised a militant sectarian group that hailed Mumtaz Qadri, the murderer of Salmaan Taseer who was the governor of Punjab.

The TLP's main support comes from the urban and rural lower-middle classes and traders. It has also made inroads into the support base of other established Islamic parties which have been virtually wiped out in Punjab. The frequent agitations are seen as a way of keeping the TLP politically alive and maintaining its financial lifeline.

It would shake the government into submission each time it marched into Islamabad, further emboldening its supporters. The 2020 agreement signed by the PTI government was perhaps the most shameful. But it didn't stop the group from launching another protest march a few months later. In panic, the PTI government declared the TLP a terrorist outfit early this year and arrested its leaders under the anti-terrorism laws. But days later, it started backing down, stalling the process required under the Constitution to provide a legal cover to the ban. The group continued its activities with impunity. The administration seems to have deliberately kept its proscription decision ambiguous. It has continued with its appeasement approach despite the TLP's violent activities.