

Pakistanis will regret marginalising Malala.

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It is a sign of the desperate, deplorable times in Pakistan that while the leader of the Pakistani Taliban, recently killed by a US drone, is hailed as a martyr and victim of American perfidy, a true heroine for this age has just had her book banned in Pakistani schools.

On November 5, Hakimullah Mehsud, the 34 year-old leader of the Pakistani Taliban whose minions have killed thousands of soldiers and civilians in mosques, churches and bazaars and trained international terrorists from the US, UK, central Asia and the Arab world, was finally put down in a US-directed drone strike on one of his hiding places in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan.

This has led to a cacophony of criticism from the government, opposition leaders and the rightwing media that the Americans sabotaged nascent peace talks between the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the Pakistani Taliban.

An even more dangerous threat is the one made by Imran Khan, the former cricketer whose party Tehreek-e-Insaf now governs the northwestern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, to close the road from Peshawar to Karachi along which the US and NATO are pulling out their heavy equipment in preparation for a withdrawal from Afghanistan next year.

Mr Khan does not see the apparent double talk here. He has been at the forefront of demanding a US withdrawal but now he seems to be blocking one. The US has several other exit plans anyway, but tens of thousands of Pakistani workers depend on the US traffic for jobs and livelihoods.

An even larger travesty looms with the banning of the autobiography "I am Malala" by Malala Yousufzai, the 16 year-old student and advocate of global education who survived a Taliban assassination attempt and is now in exile in England. The All-Pakistan Private Schools Federation said children were idealising Ms Yousufzai, while reading her book, which might leave them "in a confused state of mind", says Mirza Kashif, Foundation President in Pakistan Today.

The reasons for banning her book from all private schools in Pakistan are her purported defence of Salman Rushdie's writings, her perceived criticism of what the Koran says about women and her failure to write "Peace Be Upon Him" after the name of the Prophet Muhammad, which is obligatory in Muslim tradition. The reasons are flimsy to say the least.

Her book has sold tens of thousands of copies worldwide, particularly among young people in Pakistan who appreciate her message, which is simply one of the need for education in a country where nearly half the population is illiterate. However, she has been attacked by the right and the Islamic religious lobby for denigrating Pakistan and pandering to Western concepts of development and education.

On the other hand, it is almost certain that the much-vaunted talks between the government and the Taliban that the US drone strike are said to have killed, were not on anybody's agenda. A few hours before the drone killed Mehsud, Shahidullah Shahid, a Taliban spokesman, said nobody from the government had contacted them. "The government is making announcements only by media, no peace talks have yet been started," Mr Shahid said.

The government and Mr Khan immediately claimed that Hakimullah's death had "derailed the peace process". Many Pakistanis asked what there was to talk about anyway. The Taliban has insisted on the state dismantling all institutions, revoking democracy and imposing a sharia legal system and an Islamic Caliphate. The government has not said what concessions it is willing to offer or what it would talk about. Hakimullah has now been replaced by Maulvi Fazlullah, an even more vicious killer who has led the insurrection in the Swat Valley since 2008 and whose men tried to kill Malala. He is no more unlikely to deliver peace than his predecessor.

The reality is that the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has no comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy to offer the public. In the last few days a new sectarian bout of killing has begun in Karachi in which nearly 20 people, mostly Shias, have been gunned down by Sunni extremists, who are targeting Shia doctors in particular.

Extremism in Pakistan began in the late 1970s, clandestinely supported by successive military regimes and intelligence agencies because extremists were proxies supposed to keep India at bay and gain influence in Afghanistan. Thus extremism had a long and fruitful incubation period, before it turned on its makers, like Frankenstein's monster.

Any serious strategy to deal with terrorism and Islamic extremism is going to take several years to implement and complete. Yet the political elite insists on raising public expectations through dishonest statements and subterfuge, pretending that a single quick fix of talks or prisoner releases can somehow end the ambitions of more than fifty militant groups who are virtually holding the country hostage.

When heroines such as Malala are ignored or intentionally made controversial by the very government and political elite that would seem to benefit from their appeal and success at mobilising public opinion against terrorism and extremism, then many Pakistanis might well wonder what the future holds for them. The ruling elite needs to see the writing on the wall before it is too late.