

ISAS Brief

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The Lal Masjid Saga: Has Musharraf Finally Triumphed over Extremism in Pakistan?

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After a six-month standoff, Pakistani forces finally seized the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) complex in Islamabad last week. A day-long heavy gun battle, with grenades and rockets, claimed the lives of more than 80 militants, including Abdul Rashid Ghazi, the cleric leading the militants. The total casualties, since the clash began last week, would probably be well above 150 and included 10 army personnel.

Last week, the leading cleric, Abdul Aziz, Rashid Ghazi's elder brother, was arrested while trying to flee in the guise of a burqa (veil) with female students. About 1,700 male and female students surrendered and were taken into custody when paramilitary forces besieged the mosque.

Abdul Aziz's attempt to escape is important not because, contrary to popular belief, it 'exposed the true nature of martyrdom rhetoric' or 'brought embarrassment to martyrs'. Rather, it reflected two possibilities. Firstly, it could be a tactical move by the militants to get aid and mobilise its connections from outside. Secondly, there could be a split between the two brothers, and within the group, in the face of military action.

Rashid Ghazi's negotiation tactics in the week preceding the operation seem to support the first possibility. He had initially refused to surrender 'until Sharia [Islamic law] was implemented' in Pakistan. He then 'preferred martyrdom over surrender'. And on the eve of the assault, he agreed to surrender if all militants were allowed 'safe passage'. His final statement was that "[the attack] is naked aggression, my martyrdom is certain now ... our deaths will spark Islamic revolution".

Whatever the motivations on the side of the militants, the Pakistan government faced criticism in the manner it handled the situation since the beginning in January 2007 when baton-wielding female students seized an adjacent library in protest to the demolition of seven illegally built mosques in Islamabad by the government. Incidentally, there are tens, if not hundreds and thousands, of such illegal structures across the country.

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Neither the government nor the civil society took the baton-wielding students seriously initially. It was perhaps such terms as the ‘implementation of Sharia’, ‘Islamic revolution’, and ‘martyrdom’ were not mentioned in the initial four months. It was only when the clerics launched a Qazi court in April 2007 and students started moral policing – burning videos, kidnapping prostitutes and engaging with the police – that this rhetoric emerged. The civil society then called for strict action from the government.

The government’s dragging of its feet on this issue in the initial stages raises an important question. Was General Musharraf, with the help of the secret agencies, using the clerics to divert attention from the judicial crisis and, as usual, playing the extremist card to get support from his western allies for the coming presidential election, where he presumably faces a choice between presidency and uniform. There was also mounting questions within the ‘war on terror’ camp about Musharraf’s sincerity and capacity to fight the extremists.

When government forces eventually stormed the mosque compound, many Pakistanis, including those who had called for stiff action, were alarmed by the scores of arms and ammunition found in the mosque and the level of resistance by the militants.

The discovery of reasonably large number of arms raises serious questions. How were the militants able to stock piles of arms right under the government’s nose? Islamabad is not a tribal area. The mosque complex was under heavy police guard for six months and it is located within walking distance from the ISI headquarters, ministries, the Supreme Court and the Parliament. Was it system failure or was someone influential behind the whole plot? And if there were godfathers at the background, what were their objectives? Were these achieved? Or did the whole saga go beyond their intentions?

The Failure of the System

If the mosque saga reflected a failure on the part of the Pakistan government, it puts into question the security of the capital and other urban areas. It is clear that the Ghazi brothers were very well connected. Militant groups in the tribal areas reportedly vowed to take revenge. Al Qaeda’s Zarqawi has purportedly called for *jihad* against General Musharraf. From Washington to Islamabad, officials are expecting a backlash from the militants as well as fundamentalists across the Muslim world.

The Lal Masjid episode has certainly put a dent on Pakistan’s ratings internationally. Standards & Poor’s has already lowered Pakistan’s ranking. Despite high growth rates of seven to eight per cent in recent years, poverty, unemployment, and corruption rank ever high. Law and order in the country is poor, with violence threatening the country’s integrity. The Failed States Index has put Pakistan in the top 12 countries, along with Iraq (2nd position) and Afghanistan (8th position).

The US National Intelligence Council-CIA report had, in fact, predicted long before 9/11, that Pakistan would suffer a Yugoslavia-like fate by 2015, ripe with civil war and bloodshed.

Much earlier, in 1992, Dr Abu al Mali Syed predicted, in his book, 'The Twin Era of Pakistan', the emergence of an independent Baluchistan.

Whatever the predictions, Pakistan has shown always resilience when faced with challenges, internally and externally. It has survived many crises in the past, thanks to its civil and military bureaucracy, which also has been a part of its problems. A complete state failure is unlikely unless some extreme conspiracy theory is at work as the rumours will have it.

Extremism in Pakistan

It has been argued, plausibly, that there were godfathers behind this episode. The *Ghazi* brothers' links with secret agencies and banned terrorist organisations, and vehement support for *jihād* is not a secret. Their father and the mosque were sanctioned under General Zia ul-Haq's (1977-88) US-CIA-backed *jihād* policy to recruit and maintain a network of *jihadi* activities.

As recent as in 2003, an encroachment of *madrassah* on the state land was allowed despite their calls for *jihād* and vocal opposition to the 'war on terror'. This and other similar examples lead many analysts to charge General Musharraf for his half-hearted efforts against extremism.

A full-fledged *jihadi* culture was promoted during General Zia's period under full military and financial support from the United States. More than 100,000 students from across the world joined mushrooming *madrassahas* in early 1980s. Pakistani and American agencies were allegedly involved in lucrative drugs and arms trade.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States simply 'walked away', which Mr Kishore Mahbubani, a renowned Singaporean scholar and author of the book, 'Can Asian's Think?' said, it could not do without repercussions. The United States stopped all assistance to Pakistan, including the F-16 deal, by invoking the 'Pressler Amendment'.

The *jihadi* elements could not reconcile the idea that their 'job' had finished. So they continued on their own. The *Kashmir* issue saw new militarism. The Taliban took control in Afghanistan. The United States accepted them as the legitimate force in Afghanistan. Pakistan paid the cost of these developments in its backyard in the form of spillovers, for example, refugees, arms, drugs, sectarianism and the *Talibanisation* of an otherwise moderate society.

The 9/11 saw the Pakistan army allying with the United States in the 'war on terror'. It became an 'enlightened and moderate' nation again. This change in the Pakistan government's stance infuriated factions in the army and in the agencies involved in *jihād* so much so that General Musharraf was accused of betraying the nation by General (Retd). Hamid Gul, one of the architects of the *Afghan Jihād*, and a former Director of the ISI. The factions within the army and agencies have links from Jeddah to Washington and have been charged with sabotaging many of the operations and attempts to eliminate Al-Qaeda from the tribal areas.

Could these factions have invited the bloodbath in the Lal Masjid? This is not very clear at this point in time. However, whatever the intent of the perpetrators, an insurgency or a civil war-like situation in Pakistan emerging from the calls for *jihad* or ‘blood of martyrs’ is unlikely. More so, the calls for ‘Islamic revolution’ are no more than rhetoric of some entrapped militants.

There will be a backlash but that would be confined to protests in the urban areas which, if handled wisely, would not be a problem. As far as tribal areas are concerned, the backlash cannot be worse than what is going on for many years now.

What next for Pakistan?

Some may argue that the mosque saga has taken the attention away from the judicial crisis. Perhaps that is true. Equally importantly, it showed that General Musharraf has the ability to sideline elements in politics and army sympathetic to the extremists.

The discovery of the weapons in the mosque would have most certainly swung, some, if not many, of General Musharraf’s critics onto his side, and they grudgingly accept the need for strong action against extremist elements in the country.

The mosque saga can boomerang if not supported by immediate fundamental changes in the system and policies. A complete washout of the *madrassah* system is needed rather than reforming them and accepting their degrees in an effort to bring supporters into the Assemblies so as to get political support. A revamped education policy is also necessary to absorb all *madrassah* students.

General Musharraf needs to take a whole-hearted approach to wipe out all extremist elements within the institutions and ultimately from the country. This is no mean task. With fire raging on so many fronts for the government, only time will tell if General Musharraf is able to extinguish these fires or be engulfed in their flames.

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