

ISAS Brief

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Recent Bomb Blasts in South Asia: Are the Terrorists on a Killing Spree Again?

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On 6 July 2008, a suicide bomber blew himself up near the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad. He succeeded in taking out at least 21 lives, including those of 15 policemen. The mayhem the blasts caused was a shocking reminder of the fact that terrorist networks which had been dormant for some time are again back in the killing business.

It is intriguing to note that the government allowed the administration of the Lal Masjid to hold a conference to mark the first anniversary of a gory showdown with pitched battles being fought between Pakistani paramilitary forces and heavily-armed militants barricading inside the mosque from 3 to 10 July last year. The loss of lives then was counted from a conservative 150 to as high as 1,500. Among the dead were some military personnel.

The Lal Masjid, an elaborate Islamic seminary, comprising several building complexes, included schools for male and female pupils. The founder of the seminary, Maulana Muhammad Abdullah, was deeply involved, with the blessings of the Pakistan army, in the Afghanistan jihad of the 1980s. He was subsequently assassinated in 1998. His two sons, Ghazi Abdul Aziz and Ghazi Abdul Rashid, took over the mantle of militant Sunni Islam. They were openly supportive of the Taliban and were bitter opponents of the United States' policies in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They began to denounce the government of General Pervez Musharraf for allegedly surrendering Pakistan's sovereignty and national security to the Americans by joining their so-called 'war on terror' against fellow Muslims, which included military action against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in the tribal belt on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

From early March 2007, the two brothers and their disciples embarked upon a concerted agitation to assert their power. The whole world was awe-struck when global television networks flashed images of men and women clad in black robes, carrying long sticks and other weapons, raiding an alleged brothel run by a Pakistani woman and a Chinese massage parlour. The militants took the Chinese workers hostage and declared that they were going to impose the Islamic Shariah in Pakistan. The hostages were later released. However, the

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Islamists declared that they were going to establish Islamic courts, which would try all violators of the Shariah and punish them severely in accordance to Quranic laws.

The Ghazi brothers also issued a fatwa urging Muslims to overthrow General Musharraf. In practical terms, they were preaching open rebellion. The government initially tried to negotiate with the militants for a peaceful resolution of their grievances, but all efforts failed to bear fruit; hence the heavy loss of life resulting from hand-to-hand fighting as the military and paramilitary forces forced their way inside the Lal Masjid.

Fully aware of the violent not-too-distant Lal Masjid episode, it was thus surprising that the current Pakistani government allowed a conference to be held in Islamabad to commemorate last year's bloody episode. Was such a decision taken out of some genuine respect for the freedom of speech and assembly or was it a populist gesture to appease the militants? Whatever the rationale, it was indeed a terribly wrong decision.

Could it be that the new Pakistan People's Party (PPP)-led government simply does not have the perspective and competence to deal with the terrorist threat that looms large over Pakistan? After all, Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani came to power only at the end of February 2008 after a long period of quasi-military rule under General Musharraf and his main political ally, the docile Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-i-Azam.

It is perhaps also possible that the decision to allow the conference to go ahead was aimed at appeasing Mr Nawaz Sharif, the leader of the second biggest party in the Pakistan Parliament, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). Mr Sharif has close connections with the Saudis and is known to have a soft corner for Islamism.

The PPP and PML-N formed a coalition government after the 18 February 2008 elections. However, the PML-N withdrew after a few weeks because the two parties failed to develop a joint position on the restoration of the deposed judges and on President Musharraf's future. It is, therefore, also possible that the conference on the Lal Masjid episode was a gesture to keep Mr Sharif in good humour.

The government claimed to have made proper security arrangements to prevent terrorist attacks. Several thousand policemen were reportedly stationed in Islamabad during the commemorative conference. Whatever the preparations and calculations, it has now been proven that it was a myopic and foolish decision.

The Pakistani media has reported that several speakers at the conference whipped up passions by describing the dead leaders and cadres of the Lal Masjid as martyrs in the cause of Islam. Not surprisingly, such a suggestion put the Pakistan military in the role of killers and aggressors.

In any case, following the installation of the civilian government, the militants had suspended their intense wave of suicide bombings and other types of terrorism, possibly in the hope that General Musharraf would be forced to step down as president, and Pakistan would withdraw from the war on terror and stop helping the Americans.

This did not happen. Instead, Prime Minister Gilani reiterated that Pakistan's commitment to root out terrorism remained uncompromised, albeit backed with a broad-based strategy that included economic and political reforms to neutralise the moderate sections of the tribal

society. It is naive, however, to believe that the Islamists would abandon terrorism without making all efforts to convert Pakistan and Afghanistan into theocratic tyrannies.

In the last few weeks, increasing Taliban activism has been reported in Peshawar. Also, just a day after the suicide bombing in Islamabad, six bomb blasts took place in Karachi. At least 25 people suffered grievous injuries. The same day, a suicide bomber struck the Indian embassy in the Afghanistan capital, Kabul. Forty-one people, including four Indian diplomatic staff, were killed. Under these circumstances, there is reason to fear that terrorism may increase in Pakistan.

Are the recent terrorist outrages carried out by the same group or disparate groups? Analysts are pondering this question. It may take some time before we know the truth, if we ever know anything at all. Whatever the case, one thing is quite certain – the terrorists are on a killing spree again.

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