

Preventing More Lal Masjids

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Many well-known Pakistani political commentators seem bent upon trivializing Lal Masjid. Although the mosque's bloody siege has now entered into its fifth day, for them the comic sight of the bearded Maulana Abdul Aziz fleeing in a burqa is proof that this episode was mere puppet theatre. They say it was enacted by hidden hands within the government, expressly created to distract attention away from General Musharraf's mounting problems, as well as to prove to his supporters in Washington that he remains the last bulwark against Islamic extremism. The writers conclude that this is a contrived problem, not a real one. They are dead wrong. Lal Masjid underscores the danger of runaway religious radicalism in Pakistan. It calls for urgent and wide-ranging action.

That the crisis could have been averted is beyond doubt. The Lal Masjid militants were given a free hand by the government to kidnap and intimidate. For months, under the nose of Pakistan's super-vigilant intelligence agencies, large quantities of arms and fuel were smuggled inside to create a fearsome fortress in the heart of the nation's capital.

Even after Jamia Hafsa students went on their violent rampages in February 2007, no attempt was made to cut off the electricity, gas, phone, or website - or even to shut down their illegal FM radio station. Operating as a parallel government, the mullah duo, Maulana Abdul Rashid Ghazi and Maulana Abdul Aziz, ran their own Islamic court. They received the Saudi Arabian ambassador on the mosque premises, and negotiated with the Chinese ambassador for the release of his country's kidnapped nationals. But for the outrage expressed by China, Pakistan's all-weather ally, the status quo would have continued.

For a state that has not shied from using even artillery and airpower on its citizens, the

softness on the mullahs was astonishing. Even as the writ of the state was being openly defied, the chief negotiator appointed by Musharraf, Chaudhry Shujaat Husain, described the burqa brigade militants as "our daughters" with whom negotiations would continue and against whom "no operation could be contemplated".

But this still does not prove that the fanatics were deliberately set up, or that radicalism and extremism is a fringe phenomenon. The Lal Masjid mullahs, even as they directed kidnappings and vigilante squads, continued to lead thousands during Friday prayers. Uncounted thousands of other radically charged mullahs daily berate captive audiences about immoralities in society and dangle promises of heaven for the pious.

What explains the explosive growth of this phenomenon? Imperial America's policies in the Muslim world are usually held to blame. But its brutalities elsewhere have been far greater. In tiny Vietnam, the Americans had killed more than one million people. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese did not invest in explosive vests and belts. Today if one could wipe America off the map of the world with a wet cloth, mullah-led fanaticism will not disappear. I have often asked those of our students at Quaid-e-Azam University who toe the Lal Masjid line why, if they are so concerned about the fate of Muslims, they did not join the many demonstrations organized by their professors in 2003/4 against the immoral US invasion of Iraq. The question leaves them unfazed. For them the greater sin is for women to walk around bare faced, or the very notion that they could be considered the equal of men.

Extremism is often claimed to be the consequence of poverty. But deprivation and suffering do not, by themselves, lead to radicalism. People in Pakistan's tribal areas, now under the grip of the Taliban, have never led more than a subsistence existence. Building more roads, supplying electricity and making schools - if the Taliban allow - is a great idea. But it will have little impact upon militancy.

Lack of educational opportunity is also not a sufficient cause. It is a shame that less than 65% of Pakistani children have schools to go to, and only 3% of the eligible population goes to

universities. But these are improvements over 30 years ago when terrorism was not an issue. More importantly, violent extremism has jumped the educational divide. The 911 hijackers and the Glasgow airport doctors were highly educated men and were supported in spirit by thousands of similarly educated Muslims in Pakistan and the world at large. It is not clear to me whether persons with degrees are relatively more or less susceptible to extremist versions of Islam.

The above, as I have argued, are insufficient causes although they are significant as contributory reasons. There are more compelling explanations: the official sponsorship of jihad by the Pakistani establishment in earlier times; the poison injected into students through their textbooks; and the fantastic growth of madrassas across Pakistan.

But most of all, it has been the cowardly deference of Pakistani leaders to blackmail by mullahs. Their instinctive response has been to seek appeasement. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had suddenly turned Islamic in his final days as he made a desperate, but ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to save his government and life. A fearful Benazir Bhutto made no attempt to challenge the horrific Hudood and blasphemy laws during her premierships. And Nawaz Sharif went a step further by attempting to bring the Shariah to Pakistan.

Such slavish kow-towing had powerful consequences. The crimes of mullahs, because they are committed in the name of Islam, go unpunished today. The situation in Pakistan's tribal areas is dire and deteriorating. Inspired by the fiery rhetoric from mosques, fanatics murder doctors and health workers administering polio shots. They blow up video shops and girls schools, kill barbers who shave beards, stone alleged adulterers to death, and destroy billboards with women's faces. No one is caught or punished.

Pakistan's civil society has chosen to remain largely silent, unmoved by this barbarism. This silence has allowed tribal extremism to migrate effortlessly into the cities. Except for the posh areas of the largest metropolises, it is now increasingly difficult for a woman to walk bare-faced through most city bazaars. Reflections

of Jamia Hafsa can be found in every public university of Pakistan. Here, as elsewhere, a sustained campaign of proselytizing and intimidation is showing results. In fact, it would do little harm to rename my university, now a city of walking tents, as Jamia Quaid-e-Azam.

On April 12, to terrify the last few hold-outs, the Lal Masjid mullahs declared in their FM radio broadcast that Quaid-e-Azam University had turned into a brothel. They warned that Jamia Hafsa girls could throw acid on the faces of those female university students who refuse to cover their faces. There should have been instant outrage. Instead, fear and caution prevailed. The university administration was silent, as was the university's chancellor, General Musharraf. A university-wide meeting of about 200 students and teachers, held in the physics department, eventually concluded with a condemnation of the mullahs threat and a demand for their removal as head clerics of a government-funded mosque. But student opinion on burqas was split: many felt that although the mullahs had gone a tad too far, covering of the face was indeed properly Islamic and needed enforcement. Twenty years ago this would have been a minority opinion.

The Lal Masjid crisis is a direct consequence of the ambivalence of General Musharraf's regime towards Islamic militancy. In part it comes from fear and follows the tradition of appeasement. Another part comes from the confusion of whether to cultivate the Taliban - who can help keep Indian influence out of Afghanistan - or whether to fight them. One grieves for the officers and jawans killed in the on-going battle with fanatics. It must feel especially terrible to be killed by one's former friends and allies.

What should the government do after the guns stop firing and the hostages are out, whether dead or alive? At least two immediate actions are needed.

First, those who publicly preach hatred in mosques and call for violence against the citizens of Pakistan should be denied the opportunity to do so. The government should announce that any citizen who hears such sermons should record them, and lodge a charge in the nearest designated complaint office. The guilty should be dealt with severely under the law. In

the tribal areas, using force if necessary, the dozens of currently operating illegal FM radio stations should be closed down. Run by mullahs bitterly hostile to each other on doctrinal or personal grounds, they incite bitter tribal and sectarian wars.

Second, one must not minimize the danger posed by madrassas. It is not just their gun-toting militants, but the climate of intolerance they create in society. Where and when necessary, and after sufficient warning, they must be shut down. Establishment of new madrassas must be strictly limited. Apologists say that only 5-10 percent of madrassas breed militancy, and thus dismiss this as a fringe phenomenon. But if the number of Pakistani madrassas is 20,000 (give or take a few thousand; nobody knows for sure) this amounts to 1000-2000. Although all are not equally lethal, this is surely a lot of dangerous fringe.

The government's madrassa reform program has fallen flat on its face, and future efforts will do no better. It was absurd to have assumed that introducing computers or teaching English could have transformed the character of madrassa education away from brain-washing and rote memorization towards logical behaviour and critical thinking. Did the adeptness with which Lal Masjid managed its website really bring it into the 21'st century? Madrassas are religious institutions; they cannot be changed into normal schools. It is time to give up wasting money and effort in attempting to reform them and, instead, to radically improve the public education system and make it a viable alternative.

The Lal Masjid battle is part of the wider civil war within the Islamic world waged by totalitarian forces that seek redemption through violence.

Their cancerous radicalism pits Muslims against Muslims, and the world at large. It is only peripherally directed against the excesses of the corrupt ruling establishment, or inspired by issues of justice and equity.

Note that the Lal Masjid ideologues - and others of their ilk - do not rouse their followers to action on matters of poverty, unemployment, poor access to justice, lack of educational

opportunities, corruption within the army and bureaucracy, or the sufferings of peasants and workers.

Instead their actions are concentrated entirely on improving morality, where morality is interpreted almost exclusively in relation to women and perceived Western cultural invasion. They do not consider as immoral such things as exploiting workers, cheating customers, bribing officials, beating their wives, not paying taxes, or breaking traffic rules. Their interpretation of religion leads to bizarre failures in logic, moral reasoning, and appreciation of human life.

P.S.

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