

Pakistan: Democracy and the US War on Terror in the Subcontinent

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Few can forget the threat issued in the wake of 9/11 by Richard Armitage, then US Secretary of State to Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf: "Join the War on Terror or be bombed back to the Stone Age." That voice of a brazen bully echoes ironically in Pakistan today: in the hushed silence after the bloodshed at Lal Masjid, and in the blasts and a suicide bombing attack on a pro-democracy meeting that have followed in the wake of the Lal Masjid episode.

South Asian nations can see the proud historical civilisation of Baghdad being "bombed to the Stone Age"; to escape this fate, they must be prepared to bomb their own people into the Bush Age - a new age of Empire. Rulers of the subcontinent have unfortunately been more than eager to prostrate themselves before the US in a craven effort to prove themselves as loyal warriors in the US' holy crusade against terror. Worse still, neighbours India and Pakistan have spent more effort on pleading the case for US chastisement against each other than on resolving their mutual issues in keeping with the democratic aspirations of their peoples.

The bloodbath at the Lal Masjid took a massive toll of human life - mostly young students, women and children. The blasts that followed in its wake claimed yet more innocent lives. By many accounts, it appears that negotiations with the Lal Masjid militants had come close to resolution and that the Musharraf regime abruptly derailed and abandoned this process in order to storm the Masjid. The prompt US approval for 'Operation Silence' certainly seems to corroborate the idea that the Musharraf Government's act of silencing the Masjid was at the behest of the US.

The question remains: was Operation Silence aimed at silencing fundamentalist forces and a Masjid that bred terrorism; or was it to silence the criticism of Musharraf's pro-US policies and derail the growing democratic resistance against his regime?

The fact that the Lal Masjid was a powerful centre of fundamentalist forces which has received patronage and encouragement from Pakistan's ruling class is well known. But to club every fundamentalist outfit as simply expressions of a seamless and homogeneous worldwide phenomenon of 'Islamic terrorism' would be a falsification. An American scholar who was visiting Pakistan at the time of the Lal Masjid episode has commented that "key social and economic aspects of the story were being overlooked" in the dominant discussion on the incident. He has pointed out that beyond the fundamentalist discourse, the Lal Masjid clergy had also incorporated into their discourse, rhetoric against the corruption of the Pakistani military, political and economic elites, in contrast with the poverty and suffering of ordinary Pakistanis at the hands of the US-dominated neoliberal project. This rhetoric was no doubt part of the reason for its mass following: the residents of the Lal Masjid were overwhelmingly youth from the poorer sections of Pakistani society, who had found both home and identity in the Masjid.

Thus it seems that the Lal Masjid was itself a product of another 'Operation Silence': the one imposed by the Pakistani military, ruling class and the Musharraf regime to muzzle any democratic articulation of the resentment against the poverty sharpened by pro-US policies. The recent democratic upsurge emerging in Pakistan seemed to be in the process of filling that void. With time

and effort, that movement could have weaned away Pakistan's dispossessed youth from the likes of the Lal Masjid. But in the wake of the Lal Masjid episode, a suicide bombing attack targeted a pro-democracy mass meeting to be addressed by one of the pivots of the movement - Pakistan's suspended Chief Justice Iftikar M Chaudhry.

Clearly, the high-handed massacre in the Masjid might also have the politically useful fallout of ripping apart the possibility of an emerging mass unity that could have tolled the knell of the Musharraf regime and challenged the hold of the fundamentalist forces too.

India, rather than rejoicing with smug claims that the Musharraf regime is reaping the terror crop that it sowed, should be warned. The Lal Masjid massacre is a sign of the US war on terror bullying and buying its way into the subcontinent. Already, the India's waters have become arenas for joint military exercises with US warships. The Glasgow episode - or any other pretext - can be used to make India the next target of threats to comply - or else be bombed to the Stone Age. If India signs the Indo-US Nuke Deal, it will only seal its fate even more fully. And the consequences for the region and for our own country will be devastating.

P.S.

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