

Judges and Jihadis Torment the Regime — New Clashes in Islamabad

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Yet another crisis erupts in Pakistan. The first was dominated by civil society with lawyers and judges demanding a separation of powers and an independent judiciary. Simultaneously a group of preachers in an Islamabad mosque began to take direct action of a violent sort and demand the full implementation of the sharia (religious laws to further increase the social control of women) and a special religious police to ensure their implementation. A mosque under extremist control in the heart of Islamabad has been the spearhead of these demands. It is situated not too far from government buildings.

How could they have got the valuable urban land and built the mosque and madrassahs over two blocks without government support at some stage? They didn't. The father of the two preachers who have led the action worked for military intelligence long before Musharraf appeared on the scene. Having been once helped and funded by the State they were later declared illegal and are hence short of funds. Even a year ago they might have been bought off, but no offers were on the table. Now it was too late. Armed jihadis began to shoot at police and soldiers. Musharraf sent in his favourite fixer to broker a deal, but neither side could accept the demands of the other. The militants challenged the regime and it hit back early yesterday morning.

It is worth noting that there has been no mass mobilisation to support either the Judges or the jihadis. The multitudes remain silent and passive, seeing neither struggle as being fought in their interests. The alliance of religious parties that has provincial power in the North-West Frontier province has not defended the group that transformed the mosque and its adjoining madrassah into an armed encampment apart from requesting that the lives of innocent women and children are protected.

The whole issue raises an old question: what is the degree of Islamist penetration of the military? It can only be fear of exacerbating divisions in the military and its agencies that resulted in the extraordinary caution displayed by the regime several months ago when it was obvious that the jihadis were plotting mayhem. And, ask the cynics inside the country, whose brilliant idea was it to organise the jihadi kidnapping of Chinese nationals thus making it impossible for the regime to hold back any longer? Since the country's national interests were now at stake firm action could no longer be postponed.

Musharraf came to power in 1999 pledging a set of reforms that would transform the country. He failed to implement any of them, did deals with corrupt cliques of discredited politicians and was further weakened when he agreed to become a local point-man for the United States. The country at large continued to rot leaving a vacuum for jihadis to exploit.

While all this was happening inside the country the 36 opposition political parties, big and small, were meeting in London to map a common strategy to restore civilian rule. The conclave ended without reaching an agreement, symbolising its political impotence.

There were reports of a new attempt on General Musharraf's life last week. He survived.

His regime, too, is safe for the moment. Pakistan, alas, remains a complete mess.

Only an eruption of a mass movement from below could change the landscape, but the people are in war. They have been betrayed once too often by General and politician alike.

Why should they sacrifice their lives in vain?

P.S.

* From Counterpunch.

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