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Lal Masjid: rewarding an insurrection

Once again, Pakistan is showing its helplessness in the face of those who carry guns and bombs.

By Pervez Hoodbhoy

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The honourable Chief Justice of Pakistan says he is losing patience with the Capital Development Authority (CDA). In a court-initiated (*suo motu*) action, he wants a quick rebuilding of the Jamia Hafsa madrassa, flattened by bulldozers in 2007, after it became the centre of an insurgency. A three-judge bench of the Supreme Court, headed by the CJ, is now dragging procrastinators over the coals by issuing notices to the CDA chairman, Islamabad's chief commissioner and the interior secretary. The Court has also expressed its "displeasure" over the status of police cases against the Lal Masjid clerics and ordered the deputy attorney general to appear before it next week.

It is dangerous to comment on Pakistan's highest level of judiciary. So let me solemnly declare that the highest wisdom must lie behind this extraordinary judicial activism. Nevertheless, I must confess my puzzlement because — as was seen by all — Lal Masjid and the adjoining Jamia Hafsa had engaged in a full-scale bloody insurrection against the Pakistani government, state, and public. Hundreds died. That those who led the insurrection should be gifted 20 kanals of the choicest land in sector H-11 of Islamabad is, I think, slightly odd.

Such thoughts crossed my mind last week when a flat tyre occasioned me to walk along the outer periphery of the freshly-painted and rebuilt Red Mosque. I momentarily stopped to read a large wind and rain-weathered monument which, placed on the government-owned land that Jamia Hafsa once stood upon, declares (in Urdu) that "The sacred Islamic worship place here was destroyed by a tyrannical ruler to prevent Sharia from becoming the law".

The story of the insurrection and its tragic end is well-known. In early January 2007, the Lal Masjid had demanded the immediate rebuilding of eight illegally-constructed mosques that had been knocked down by the CDA. Days later, an immediate enforcement of the Sharia system in Islamabad was demanded. Thereafter, armed vigilante groups from this madrassa roamed the streets and bazaars. They kidnapped ordinary citizens and policemen, threatened shopkeepers, and repeated the demands of the Taliban and other tribal militants fighting the Pakistan Army.

At a meeting held in Lal Masjid on April 6, 2007, it was reported that 100 guest religious leaders from across the country pledged to die for the cause of Islam and Sharia. On April 12, in an FM broadcast, the clerics issued a threat to the government: "There will be suicide blasts in the nook and cranny of the country. We have weapons, grenades and we are expert in manufacturing bombs. We are not afraid of death...."

Lal Masjid was headed by two clerics, the brothers Maulana Abdul Aziz and Maulana Abdur Rashid Ghazi. They had attracted a core of militant organisations around them, including the pioneer of suicide bombings in the region, Jaish-e-Muhammad. Also on April 12 2007, Rashid Ghazi, a former student of my university, broadcast the following chilling message to our female students:

"The government should abolish co-education. Quaid-e-Azam University has become a brothel. Its female professors and students roam in objectionable dresses. They will have to hide themselves in hijab otherwise they will be punished according to Islam.... Our female students have not issued the threat of throwing acid on the uncovered faces of women. However, such a threat could be used for creating the fear of Islam among sinful women. There is no harm in it. There are far more horrible punishments in the Hereafter for such women."

For months, unhindered by General Musharraf's government, the Lal Masjid operated a parallel government that was barely a mile or two away from the presidency and parliament. Its minions ran an unlicensed FM radio station, occupied a government building, set up a parallel system of justice, made bonfires out of seized cassettes and CDs, 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 subsequent outrage expressed by Pakistan's all-weather ally, the status quo would have continued indefinitely.

Nevertheless, our courts say that they cannot find any evidence of wrongdoing during the entire six-month long saga. They say there are no witnesses or acceptable evidence. Abdul Aziz and Umme Hassan (his wife, who heads Jamia Hafsa), therefore, stand exonerated. Also lacking, they say, is proof that the Lal Masjid accused possessed heavy weaponry.

But Islamabad's residents know better. When the showdown came in July 2007, machine guns chattered away as mortars and rocket launchers exchanged their deadly fire. Copious TV coverage shows armed madrassa students putting on gas masks to avoid the dense smoke. The final push left 10 of Pakistan's crack SSG commandos dead, together with scores of defenders. A tidal wave of suicide attacks — as promised by the clerics — promptly followed.

Some speculate that the land gifted to Aziz and Hassan is actually the price for keeping hornets inside their nest. This is not impossible because suicide bomb attacks inside Pakistan's major cities have decreased dramatically in the last two years. The authorities claim credit, saying the reason is better intelligence about violent groups and better policing. But anyone driving through Islamabad knows how trivially easy it is to conceal weapons and explosives; the security measures are certainly a nuisance to citizens but hopelessly ineffective otherwise. So, could the H-11 land offer be part of a much wider peace deal with various militant groups?

The temptation to make deals has grown after the battle for Lal Masjid. It is clear who won and who lost. Even as they fought tooth and nail against the Pakistan Army, the madrassa clerics were never dismissed and continued to receive their full government salaries. On the other hand, General Musharraf — who acted only after things went out of control — now sulks in exile. All madrassa curriculum reform plans are dead; the government does not talk about them anymore — let the clerics teach what they want.

Appeasement is the hallmark of a weak state and dithering leadership. Once again, Pakistan is showing its helplessness in the face of those who carry guns and bombs. For a country alleged to have the world's fastest growing nuclear arsenal, this is surely ironical.

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