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Extremism in Pakistan: Time for decisive action

*Arabinda Acharya and Khuram Iqbal**

18 July 2007

THE STORMING of the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad was a demonstration of President Musharraf's resolve against extremism and terrorism. It may signal the start of an all-out war against the growing influence of the Taliban and al Qaeda in Pakistan. Musharraf has vowed that his government will now aim for the complete elimination of extremist elements in Pakistan. As most of those involved in the Lal Mosque stand-off were from the North Western Frontier Province (NWFP), Musharraf's proposed offensive against the militancy and terrorism can be expected to be focused on these areas. This would also include radical madrassas which have become the incubators for terrorism in Pakistan.

While this would appease the frustration in the West, especially in the United States, over Islamabad's failure to rein in the remnants of al Qaeda and Taliban, there could be more problems ahead for the government. These involve the potential for a tribal rebellion in NWFP, especially the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA), and a backlash by sympathetic Islamic political parties all over the country. Musharraf has also to balance the domestic and international aspirations for more democratic governance in Pakistan with the necessity of having to deal with extremism and terrorism with an iron hand.

Already the Lal Mosque episode is being compared with the 1984 operation by the Indian government against Sikh militants who took shelter in the Golden Temple in Amritsar in Punjab. The storming of Sikhism's most sacred place further radicalized the Sikhs and led to the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister of India, by her own Sikh bodyguards. The 'Operation Silence' on the Red Mosque has evoked similar reactions from the jihadists. During the operation itself, there was an attempt on the life of Musharraf. In a message, al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri urged the Pakistanis to avenge the storming of the Lal Mosque and the sacrifice of 'martyrs' in the cause of Islam. Similarly, Maulana Suffi Mohammad, the leader of the pro-Taliban organization Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Muhammadi (TNSM), has called for jihad against the Musharraf government. It appears that the 2006 truce between the government and local tribal leaders and militants in various parts of NWFP has come to an end, as both sides' head towards confrontation.

The fallout

Since 3 July 2007, when Pakistani rangers laid siege to Lal Mosque in Islamabad, about 100 persons, mostly from the security forces, have been killed in attacks in different parts of Pakistan. More than half were killed in attacks after the storming of the Mosque on 11 July 2007. The numbers of suicide bombings have also rapidly increased (at least 5 suicide attacks between 12 and 15 July 2007), showing the intensity of the reactions from jihadi outfits over the Lal Mosque issue. In various parts of the NWFP, radical and terrorist elements, including the Taliban on both sides of the Pakistan-

Afghanistan border, are coming together to avenge the killings of a ‘religious cleric’ and ‘madrassa students’. Islamic militants of tribal areas, commonly known as the ‘local Taliban’, have been targeting the security forces in their attacks. Recent reports suggest that these tribal militants have decided to extend their operations to other parts of Pakistan. The involvement of Millat-e-Islamia (formerly known as Sipah-e-Sahaba, a Sunni sectarian outfit), which fully supported the Lal Mosque clerics, could compound the matter, as the group has extensive presence in Pakistan’s non-tribal areas.

Threats to Musharraf’s government are not from radical Islamists alone. Different religious political groups and parties have also announced their intention to have a “final round” with the government. Wifaq-ul-Madaris Al-Arabia, a collective platform of 8199 registered Deobandi madrasas in Pakistan has called for a countrywide movement against the Musharraf government. The supreme leader of Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), an alliance of religious parties, and head of Jamat-e-Islami Pakistan, Qazi Hussain Ahmad, has announced his resignation from the national assembly in protest against the storming of the mosque. Unfortunately for Pakistan, the mainstream political parties remain marginalized and fragmented and without much influence on domestic public opinion. This has given a chance to the radical groups to expand their public space at the expense of secular voices in Pakistan.

A balancing act

This is for the second time in the political history of Pakistan that religious hardliners are indulging in a direct confrontation with the state.

In the late 1970s religious parties united in support of the implementation of ‘Nizam-e-Mustafa’ (Movement for the establishment Muhammad’s law) against what they termed the ‘infidel-socialist’ government under the premiership of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Subsequently during the military rule under General Zia-ul- Haq, Pakistani society was dragged into religious fundamentalism. As an ally of the international community in the ‘war on terror,’ Musharraf has committed to reform Pakistani society with ‘Enlightened Moderation’ in Islam. Numerous initiatives have been taken by his government to counter extremist trends in the society. But this has proven to be a very difficult task, given decades of radical penetration in almost all institutions of Pakistani society.

Strategically, while Musharraf appeared to have kept these elements under control, some of the most recent sensitive political issues enabled the extremists to openly challenge this transition to moderation. It is in this context that one must view the events of the last few days with respect to the Lal Mosque. Whereas democratic forces are waging their movement against military rule, the Islamic fundamentalists are opposed to Musharraf for his tough handling of jihadism. How Musharraf responds to the situation is critical as it involves a very delicate balancing act.

Time to act decisively

No government would tolerate its writ being undermined in the way the occupants of Lal Mosque were doing to enforce Islamic law in predominantly secular Islamabad. Ultimately, in view of the domestic and international pressures it was impossible for Musharraf’s government to avoid the resolution of Lal Mosque dispute in any other way after six months of attempts at peaceful settlement. Nor should it tolerate the fact that a significant portion of its territory is being used by extremists and terrorists to further their objectives. The Taliban and al Qaeda have already taken advantage of the truce between the government and tribal leaders in the NWFP. By systematically undermining the authority of the tribal leaders, al Qaeda and the Taliban have managed to regroup themselves and create opportunities for training for more sophisticated attacks not only in Pakistan and Afghanistan, but also in other parts of the world, including the US and the United Kingdom.

The Lal Mosque episode is both a challenge and an opportunity. It is time to demonstrate that radicals

cannot dictate terms in Pakistan. The average Pakistanis do not have patience for instability and chaos that radicalization portends. At the same time Islamabad could not remain indecisive against the elements in the tribal regions on the grounds that the areas remain inaccessible and beyond its writ. Musharraf has an unfinished agenda -- to weed out extremism and terrorism that harms Pakistan more than it does the international community.

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