

Musharraf's Moment of Truth

Contributed by Sajid Huq
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"The Lal Masjid crisis is by no means a break from a recent history of religious militantism and extremism in Pakistan. Musharraf's military response to the situation certainly is. However Musharraf deals with the extremists, it is clear that his days are numbered. And whoever succeeds Musharraf may have no choice but to continue his recently-adopted heavy-handed tactics in dealing with militants, fueling violent Islam even further." (Photos by D.D.)

Although modern, Islamabad is a rather boring city. Built as an administrative capital, the city lags behind Lahore and Karachi in cultural activities, entertainment options and general urban hustle. However, on July 1st, scenes from Islamabad hogged TV channels both national and international, as the world watched Islamic militants hold hostage hundreds of women and children inside Lal Masjid, a mosque and seminary complex in the heart of the city. The entire operation was masterminded by two brothers, Abdul Aziz and Abdul Rashid Ghazi, with the blessings of one Ayman Al Zawahiri. The Islamist firebrands had decided to break with the Pakistani military government - their former allies. Their ransom? An end to Musharraf's pandering to America's War of Terror and a speedy establishment of the Shariah. Ten days into the hostage crisis, Army commandos stormed the complex. Abdul Rashid Ghazi was killed, along with 76 militants and 11 soldiers. However, these are official estimates; Pakistani TV stations, newspapers, and blogs give estimates that are almost double. The Lal Masjid crisis seems akin to a suicide mission, intended to provoke the Pak Army into retaliation and set the ball rolling towards a larger catastrophe. "We have a firm belief in God that our blood will lead to a revolution; God willing, Islamic revolution will be the destiny of this nation," Abdul Rashid Ghazi predicted. Mayhem begins Since then, what has ensued is utter mayhem. A series of bomb attacks has claimed a whopping 285 lives this month, at least 180 between July 14 and the time of this article's writing. The deadliest was on Thursday, July 19, in Hub, 50 kilometres from Karachi, when a car bomber, apparently targeting a vehicle carrying Chinese workers rammed into a police vehicle, killing 30, 23 of them innocent bystanders. But a small-scale civil war between the militants and Musharraf's army is not the only impediment to the latter's designs for a "true" democracy in Pakistan, promised in 1999, still undelivered. On July 20, the Pakistani Supreme Court stepped all over Musharraf's efforts to oust Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry. Earlier, in May, the General had summoned the Chief Justice to Army headquarters and asked him to resign. Enraged by Musharraf's authoritarianism, hundreds of lawyers demonstrated against his assault on the judiciary's independence, and were beaten up by riot police. By June, the demonstrations had united large sections of Pakistan's civil society and snowballed into a countrywide movement, demanding fair elections, a civilian government, and respect for the Constitution. Not since the dictator Ayub Khan's regime in 1969 did a military government so thoroughly antagonize both the Pakistani Left and the Right. Ayub Khan was also the first to declare martial law, in 1958, paving the way for a series of military interventions into politics following his. Army Chief Yahya Khan took over reigns in 1969. Zia-ul-Haq in 1977, and finally Pervez Musharraf in 1999. An understanding of Pakistan's political-military history is essential to understanding the current developments and future possibilities. The story starts somewhere during the British Empire in India. Roots of many Lal Masjids Legacies of the British Raj did much to configure the civil-military relations in Pakistan, created in its wake. After the Rebellion of 1857, much of the British Indian Army came from the Punjab, now divided between India and Pakistan. One of the reasons for this was that the British believed that Punjabis were more "martial" on the back of pseudo-scientific race theories that were notorious in Victorian England. Punjabi representation in the British Indian Army was often as high as 25%, although Punjab's population was around 7% of British India's. For Punjabis, joining the British Indian Army became a direct route to prestige, financial success, and retirement benefits. In 1947, a newly independent Pakistan inherited a disproportionate amount of the British Indian Army. Over 500 British officers stayed behind to build up the Pak Army, which became by far the most powerful institution in the young state. Meanwhile, the Indian state had inherited most of the Raj's bureaucratic machinery. The Pak Army soon became the guarantors of the state's honor, sovereignty, and security. Relatively successful campaigns in the Indo-Pak wars of 1948 and 1965 confirmed the army's sense of purpose and superiority. High ranking army officers were thoroughly Anglicized, professing a love for alcohol, polo, and British military journals. A distrust of and scorn for civilian leaders and politicians was commonplace in the barracks. According to Pakistani journalists, "bloody civilians" became a cherished phrase in army officers' vocabulary as they stepped outside the gates of the Military Academy in Kakool. In 1979, amidst an environment of already strained civil-military relations, stepped in one Zia-ul-Haq. The Cold War was already underway and Pakistan had become an American ally. 1979 also saw the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. During the Soviet-Afghan war, madrassas in Pakistan proliferated under the army's patronage, not just for the sake of disseminating religious teaching, but to support the Afghan Mujahideen. There were around 200 seminaries in 1947. The number increased to 3000 by 1988, when the Soviet were defeated. Throughout the Afghan War, Lal Masjid operated as a factory that churned out fighters, a school for the general public, and a fund-manager for the mujahideen, with CIA blessings. The Pakistan military-government provided great material support to Islamist firebrands like Maulana Abdullah, the man in charge of the Lal Masjid. The Masjid received substantial land grants and attracted a large member of the military brass to its prayers. In 1984, it relocated to the posh E-7 sector of Islamabad. In 1998, Abdullah was shot dead by Shi'a assailants. But by this time, the Lal Masjid came to occupy an important niche in Pakistan's religio-political landscape. A seminary for young men, Jami'a Faridia had been a part of the mosque compound since its inception. Jami'a Hafsa was established for young women. The Masjid-Madrassa

establishment attracted thousands. It had also grown increasingly warm to the Taleban and allegedly, Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. It was Abdullah's death that brought to power, his sons, Abdul Aziz and Abdul Rashid. Not unlike their Taleban allies, the brothers instituted a religious police that included burqa-clad young women who went around threatening video-store owners, burning material considered pornographic, kidnapping prostitutes, and calling for an establishment of the Shariah. English-language dailies labeled them "Chicks with sticks." Increasingly enraged by Musharraf's support for America's adventures in Afghanistan, Lal Masjid's students stepped up their anti-government activities. The straw that broke the army's patience was the kidnapping of 22 Chinese masseuses in an upscale massage parlor in Islamabad by the burqa brigade. China sent some harsh words of admonishment Musharraf's way, and soon the government shut down the website of Lal Masjid and canceled its radio broadcast license. In retaliation, the brothers created the hostage situation. A foreboding future The Lal Masjid crisis is by no means a break from a recent history of religious militantism and extremism in Pakistan. Musharraf's military response to the situation certainly is. However Musharraf deals with the extremists, it is clear that his days are numbered. As threats from Al Qaeda mount urging their friends in Pakistan to rise up against the General - the US government has declared it would attack jihadi bases inside Pakistan, greatly worrying the Pak military government. Pakistani civil society, lawyers, activists, journalists, NGO-workers, are as united and vocal as ever in calling for Musharraf's ouster. Opponents of the General claim that Iftikhar Chaudhry, the reinstated Chief Justice, was suspended because he refused to do the General's bidding by blocking the sale of a state-owned steel mill, which would have contributed to many army officers' coffers. In general, reports of the Army's profiteering abound. In a recently published book on the Pak Army and its economic empire, political scientist Ayesha Siddiqi estimates that the military controls assets worth at least twenty billion dollars, a third of all heavy manufacturing in the country, and twelve million acres of land. As famous activist Asma Jahangir put it, "The Army is into every business in this country. Except hairdressing." How Musharraf will go is anyone's speculation. There are reports that the General is trying to strike a deal with Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP). Bhutto's government was also corrupt, but what worries Pakistani citizens and commentators more than that is that Musharraf handing over the reigns to Benazir hardly bodes well for religious violence in Pakistan. Whoever succeeds Musharraf will have no choice but to continue his recently adopted heavy-handed tactics in dealing with militants. PPP is the largest party, and greatly disliked by the religious right. After 9/11, Bhutto argued that had she been in power, the Taleban would not have been strengthened. Actions speak louder than words, and many fear that in Benazir's case, they won't. Jugnu Mohsin, publisher of the Friday Times, forebodes, "the fall of Musharraf could well lead to the rise of violent political Islam."

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