

What Next After Karachi's Carnage?

by
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General Pervez Musharraf is now a desperate man. Dozens were left dead in a horrific carnage on May 12, initiated by his violent political allies in Karachi, the MQM, in an attempt to stem the popular protests against Musharraf's dismissal of the chief justice of Pakistan. But this will not buy him enough and protests will continue. His "million man rally" in Islamabad, held on the same day, blatantly used the state's full organizational machinery and was widely ridiculed. It was seen as a sign of weakness rather than strength.

So what is Musharraf likely to do next?

Military generals and fanatical clerics have been symbiotically linked in Pakistan's politics for decades. They have often needed and helped the other attain their respective goals. And they may soon need each other again – this time to set Islamabad ablaze. An engineered bloodbath that leads to the army's intervention, and the declaration of a national emergency, could serve as excellent reason for postponing the October 2007 elections. Although Musharraf denies that he wants a postponement, a lengthy martial law may now be his only chance for a continuation of his dictatorial rule into its eighth year – and perhaps beyond.

This perverse strategy sounds almost unbelievable. A man who President George W. Bush describes as his "buddy" in the war against terror, and the celebrated author of an "enlightened moderate" version of Islam, Musharraf wears the two close assassination attempts on his life by religious extremists as a badge of honour. But his secret reliance upon the Taliban card – one that he has been accused of playing for years – increases as his authority and judgment weaken.

The signs of government engineered chaos are manifest. For many months now, here in the heart of Pakistan's capital, vigilante groups from a government funded mosque, the Lal Masjid, have roamed the streets and bazaars as they impose Islamic morality and terrorize citizens in full view of the police. Openly sympathetic to the Taliban and tribal militants fighting the Pakistan army, the two cleric brothers who head Lal Masjid, Maulana Abdul Aziz and Maulana Abdur Rashid Ghazi, have attracted a core of banned militant organizations around them. These include the Jaish-e-Muhammad, considered to be the pioneer of suicide bombings in the region.

The clerics openly defy the state. Since Jan 21, 2007, baton wielding burqa-clad students of the Jamia Hafsa, the women's Islamic university located next to Lal Masjid, have forcibly occupied a government building, the Children's Library. In one of their many forays outside the seminary, this burqa brigade swooped upon a house, which they claimed was a brothel, and kidnapped 3 women and a baby.



Students of Jamia Hafsa (Women's University) in Islamabad demonstrate for Shariah law.



Victory for the Burqa Brigade

The male students of Islamabad's many madrassas are even more active. They terrorize video shop owners, who they accuse of spreading pornography and vice. Newspapers have carried pictures of grand bonfires made with seized cassettes and CDs. Most video stores in Islamabad have now closed down. Their owners duly repented after a fresh campaign by

militants on May 4 bombed a dozen music and video stores, barber shops and a girls school in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP).



Enjoying video burnings in Islamabad

The Pakistani state has shown astonishing patience. It showed its displeasure in Karachi with bullets, while other challengers have been hit with air and artillery power. But the Lal Masjid clerics operate with impunity. No attempt has been made to cut off their electricity, gas, phone, or website – or even to shut down their illegal FM radio station. The chief negotiator appointed by Musharraf, Chaudhry Shujaat Husain, described the burqa brigade kidnappers as “our daughters”, with whom negotiations would continue and against whom “no operation could be contemplated”.

Soon after they went on the warpath, the clerics realized that the government wanted to play ball. Their initial demand – the rebuilding of 8 illegally constructed mosques that had been knocked down by Islamabad’s civic administration – transformed into a demand for enforcing the Shariah in Pakistan. At a meeting held in the mosque on April 6, over 100 guest religious leaders from across the country pledged to die for the cause of Islam and Shariah. On April 12, (also reported in *The News*, Islamabad, April 24) in an FM broadcast from the Lal Masjid’s illegal FM station, the clerics issued a threat: “*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....*”



Confronting the state – with the state's connivance

The Lal Masjid head cleric, a former student of my university in Islamabad, added the following chilling message for our women students in the same broadcast:

The government should abolish co-education. Quaid-e-Azam University has become a brothel. Its female professors and students roam in objectionable dresses. I think I will have to send my daughters of Jamia Hafsa to these immoral women. 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.

If the truth be told, QAU resembles a city of walking double-holed tents rather than the brothel of a sick mullah's imagination. The last few bare-faced women are finding it more difficult by the day to resist. But then, that is precisely the aim of the Islamists. On May 7, a female teacher in the QAU history department was physically assaulted in her office by a bearded, Taliban-looking man who screamed that he had instructions from Allah. President Musharraf – who is the chancellor of QAU and often chooses to be involved in rather petty university administrative affairs – has made no comment on the recent developments.

What next? As Islamabad heads the way of Pakistan's tribal towns, the next targets will be girls schools, internet cafes, bookshops and western clothing stores, followed by shops selling toilet paper, tampons, underwear, mannequins, and other un-Islamic goods.

In a sense, the inevitable is coming to pass. Until a few years ago, Islamabad was a quiet, orderly, modern city different from all others in Pakistan. Still earlier it was largely the abode of Pakistan's hyper-elite and foreign diplomats. But the rapid transformation of its demography brought with it hundreds of mosques with multi-barrelled audio-cannons mounted on minarets, as well as scores of madrassas illegally constructed in what used to be public parks and green areas. Now, tens of thousands of their students with little prayer caps dutifully chant the Quran all day. In the evenings they roam in packs through the city's streets and bazaars, gaping at store windows and lustfully ogling bare-faced women.

The stage for transforming Islamabad into a Taliban stronghold is being set. If at all it is to be prevented, resolute opposition from its citizens will be needed to prevent more Lal Masjid from creating their own shariah squads.



Victory for the virtuous

The responsibility for the current bout of religious terrorism in Islamabad falls squarely on General Musharraf's government, which has clearly chosen to secretly sanction it. It was a desperate stratagem but it will not work. Musharraf is already a lame duck. His three principal intelligence agencies are split among themselves on many issues, as is his political party. The Americans have finally wearied of his cleverness in fighting for their dollars while secretly supporting the Taliban. When he exits – which may be sooner rather than later – Musharraf will have left a legacy that will last for generations. All this for a little more taste of power.

The author teaches physics at Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad. Pictures courtesy of Ishaque Choudhry.