

Lal Masjid: Wages of Extremism

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An exceptionally momentous week this has been. In fact, it began in the midst of a national distress. And I am referring to last week's cyclone along Balochistan and Sindh's coastal areas and the rain floods. In Balochistan, particularly, the devastation has highlighted the historic neglect of its people by rulers who reside in Islamabad. Finally, President General Pervez Musharraf has made that ritualistic visit to the affected areas and announced relief measures that are intended to appear generous. But charity can hardly make a difference to the life of a people deprived of their basic human rights.

On Monday, as this treacherous week began, the government suffered a remarkable loss of face in the Supreme Court when documents presented in the court were discovered to contain some 'scandalous' material. The 13-member full-court hearing the petition of the chief justice against the presidential reference suspended the license of the advocate-on-record, who owned the responsibility of submitting the documents that contained unsigned intelligence reports, including dirty remarks about the judges.

This was the kind of shame for the government that would linger in our judicial history. While the documents were withdrawn, the court banned the personnel of the intelligence agencies from entering the superior courts and ordered that the premises of the court and the residences of the judges should be inspected to check if any bugging devices had been planted there. What this meant was very obvious. One expected this development to have its thunderous reverberations in the media and in the minds of discerning citizens.

Also, this was the week that was to end with a focus on the All Parties Conference being held in London. By all means, it promises to have a large political significance at a time when the ruling dispensation is gasping for breath and when the judicial crisis has injected some new realities into the body politic. What the opposition political parties decide to do to contend with their monumental challenges is bound to be crucial for Pakistan's destiny.

But something happened on Tuesday and it camouflaged the entire scene. Because of certain moves made by the law enforcing agencies around Lal Masjid, the militants who have defied the writ of the state for at least six months, were prompted to resort to violence. A downtown locality in the capital became a war zone and late at night, a curfew was imposed in the area and an operation was launched.

Wednesday was the first day of this operation and suddenly, every other issue was pushed aside and the nation was put on edge, watching a great encounter on television screens. I have already indicated that this operation may have been intended as a clever stratagem to divert people's attention from some other issues. But it is in itself an overwhelming event with enormous potential to bring about unforeseen consequences.

I am writing these words in the early afternoon of Saturday and the operation against Lal Masjid, on its fifth day, remains a pulsating concern for all of us. During about one hundred hours of this confrontation, we have had a roller-coaster ride in terms of our emotional responses to this historic spectacle. It is a greatly disturbing experience in its human dimension.

Do we know how our feelings have been modified and stirred during this week? Lal Masjid, including Jamia Hafsa, symbolises our national disorders and we do not know how its conclusion would influence the course of religious militancy in Pakistan. In his own perverted manner, Maulana Abdul Rashid Ghazi is so far saying no to the might of the government and this may cause major impediments in the war on terror.

We are witnessing, through the coverage of this operation by our television channels, the raw footage of history — with its moments of farce as well as heart-rending tragedy. On Wednesday, the head cleric of Lal Masjid, Maulana Abdul Aziz was captured while trying to escape in a burqa. This theatrical interlude conveyed a message that was not certified by later developments. Lal Masjid's defiance did not weaken in its immediate aftermath.

Incidentally, the manner in which the state television dealt with Abdul Aziz and his burqa immediately transformed the farce into a tragedy. An interview was telecast of the captive in which he was made to appear in his burqa, lifting the veil to show his face. This was the cleric who would never come before the camera because of his religious beliefs. It showed how the media wizards of this government, who sit in judgment on the role of the independent channels, are themselves total nincompoops when it comes to observing ethical standards of broadcasting.

As the standoff continued, many different aspects of the Lal Masjid operation prompted very disquieting thoughts. The very fact that the administration, with the army and its strategic capabilities at its disposal, was not readily able to deal with the armed militants in the complex or rescue so many hundreds of women and men, including children, held inside raises questions about how extremism is allowed to flourish in this country. After all, the Musharraf regime has been there for almost eight years and here is evidence about what it has done during this time.

Consider also the incongruity of all this happening in Islamabad. We can forget that old joke about Islamabad being so many kilometres away from Pakistan. It is now, in some ways, in Karachi's neighbourhood. Imagine a central part of the city being under curfew, with all the misery that this situation can cause to the citizens.

In a very different context, I had once quoted a friend saying that Islamabad was our death wish. The idea was to underline its opulence and grandeur in an impoverished country. Lal Masjid has provided a new interpretation to that forbidding thought. It was in Islamabad that a religious complex was able to emerge as a state within a state. The present operation has confirmed the worst fears of the citizens about the quality of this government's governance.

Initially, the operation won great praise for Musharraf in the western media. But a post-mortem of this episode, after it is over, may substantiate the view that this government has played both sides in its war against religious militancy. Nobody can believe that Lal Masjid could have survived so far and done what it was doing without some support from some elements in the establishment.

So, what are the lessons of Lal Masjid? A great confusion reigns in the minds of Pakistani citizens who want to understand this phenomenon. Let me only quote Matthew Arnold: "And we are here as on a darkling plain; / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night".

P.S.

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