

What next after Lal Masjid?

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There is relief in the international community at the decision finally made in Islamabad to confront the clerics of Lal Masjid and hold them accountable under the law for their offences against the innocent citizens of the capital city. China and the UK, both threatened by mullah power in Pakistan in different ways, were the first to congratulate President General Pervez Musharraf for grasping the nettle before it could lead to more clerical rebellion. Significantly, the Indian prime minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, said that forward movement on the bilateral Indo-Pak peace process was hampered by Pakistan's "internal trouble", an indirect way of saying that if you sort out the jihadis and mullahs then we can be in business again.

As the decision-making process in Islamabad ground on slowly at the outset of the crisis, some parts of Pakistan ruled by the clergy began to show signs of agitation. Lahore's Jamia Ashrafiya took out its myriad acolytes and blocked the roads and inflicted some vandalism on public property as a way of showing their loyalty to the Aziz-Rashid duo of Lal Masjid. In Karachi, many Deobandi seminaries took similar action, including the mother of all seminaries, the Jamia Banuria, where the founder of Lal Masjid, Maulana Abdullah had been educated. Mr Abdullah, as well as the head of Banuria, Mufti Shamzai, were killed because of their involvement in the sectarian war in Pakistan.

The third seminary - which is actually a small movement now - that took action was the Tehreek Nifaz Shariat Muhammadi (TNSM) of Malakand-Swat. Led by a relative of Sufi Muhammad - in jail because of his local Taliban mobilisation against the Americans in Afghanistan - the movement is virtually in control of a chunk of the Provincially Administered Tribal Areas (PATA). The leader Maulana Fazlullah has money and ammunition to confront the state. But he too has

been ignored long enough - somewhat like the Aziz-Rashid brothers of Islamabad - to enable him consolidate his rule in the Malakand-Swat-Dir region in the NWFP. The latest crisis in the entire province came when he used his illegal FM radio network to tell his listeners that the polio vaccination drive in the province was "a conspiracy of the Jews and Christians to stunt the population growth of Muslims". He accused the polio vaccinators of attempting to "un-sex" the population of Pakistan through disabling hormones. Since the local people know no other authority but his, they boycotted the vaccination drive.

There are other areas that have also "broken free" of Pakistan. In the Khyber Agency, warlords and mullahs collect revenue and hand down punishments like stoning to death and fining for not keeping beards. But it is Maulana Fazlullah who should be carefully observed. He began by destroying the music shops after "compensating" them with money accumulated through donations of jewellery from the women of Peshawar under MMA rule. His "collection" - quoted at \$2 million - was so big that he now plans to build a grand seminary to dwarf Lal Masjid.

General Musharraf must also take a close look at what various governments in the past have allowed to happen to the capital city. Today, there are 88 seminaries imparting religious education to more than 16,000 students. It is not for nothing that every third male in Islamabad keeps a jihadi beard and looks scary to foreigners. Research has revealed that the number of students of the Deobandi seminaries, including the Jamia Hafsa and the Jamia Faridia, doubled during last year. The students to these seminaries - many of them residential - have flocked from all parts of the NWFP and the tribal areas. The breakdown is as follows: Deobandi (5,400 students); Bareilvi (3,000 students in 46 seminaries), Ahle-Hadith (200 students in two seminaries); Shia (700 students in eight seminaries) and Jamaat-e-Islami-led Rabitaul Madaris (1,500 students in 18 seminaries).

According to a newspaper investigative report, "the present number of 10,700 seminarians in Islamabad alone is almost equal to the combined

strength of the seminary students from Balochistan (6,374 students) and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (2,835 students)". Who has tried to change the character of Islamabad through a proliferation of extremist seminaries? One could quickly claim that President Musharraf could not have been involved in this proliferation because of his exhortations against extremism. But that would be incorrect: During the rule of General Zia-ul-Haq (from July 1977 to August 1988), 7 new seminaries were established in the federal capital; under President Musharraf, the number went up to 14!

The main political parties in Pakistan are hardly aware of the danger these seminaries on the fringes of law pose to their rule when they come to the helm of governance in the future. Many politicians actually have their sons trained in these seminaries as a token of their devotion. But they are mistaken if they think the seminaries will relent in their fundamental mission of "insulation, indoctrination and rejection" to let them govern under democracy. Unless General Musharraf fashions a solid policy to reverse this tide decisively, it is only a matter of time before the next big "Islamic" crisis occurs to challenge the "writ of the state" and poses a bigger threat than Jamia Hafsa ever did. *

P.S.

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