

Pakistan in the Shadow of the Lal Masjid Raid

by Ramtanu Maitra

Since July 11, when Pakistani security forces in Islamabad took back control of the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) from Islamic fundamentalists, Pakistan and the semi-autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Agencies (FATA) bordering Afghanistan have been rocked by explosions and killings by suicide bombers. The targets of the bombers are Pakistani soldiers, Chinese workers, and white-skinned foreigners. However, most of the victims so far have been Pakistanis who are not in the military. In particular, a section of the FATA—the agencies (provinces) of South Waziristan, North Waziristan, and Bijaur—could be deathtraps in the coming days for the Pakistani military and foreigners alike.

Moreover, as the veteran Pakistani columnist M.B. Naqvi pointed out in the daily *The News*, before the raid on the Lal Masjid began, the mosque's leaders have links with the Pakistan Army. A wide swathe of intelligent opinion believes that they served Pakistan's intelligence services well during the 1980s jihad in Afghanistan, Naqvi said. As for America's covert war against the Soviets, carried on by paid mujahideen, the United States and its friends pumped in \$40-50 billion in a decade in a socially backward and economically poor area. In addition, some European agents taught the natives the art of heroin production and marketing. The Americans, British, Germans, and of course, the Saudis and other conservative Arab regimes actively favored the reactionary Islamic extremism of largely, but not exclusively, Pushtun jihadists, Naqvi said. He also pointed out that "no outsider can know the precise limits of that collaboration by the Lal Masjid leadership with the army and possible other agencies."

President Pervez Musharraf, whose life is now in grave danger, is trying not to provoke the militants any further, but it would be a serious test for him to remain passive and not face the militants' violent challenge head-on. It would be difficult for him for two obvious reasons—the same reasons that led him to raid the Lal Masjid.

Two Pressure Sources

Musharraf is under extreme pressure from the United States and China to eliminate the jihadis. Washington, under the thumb of Vice President Dick Cheney and his blood-thirsty cabal, has been warning the Pakistani President to take on those in the FATA tribal areas and clear that area of jihadis, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban. The proposal translates to asking Musharraf to declare war against Pakistan's citizens on behalf of U.S. and NATO forces. The reason Cheney is

putting pressure on Musharraf is that the reading among that war-hungry circle, is that unless Pakistan clears itself of the “Islamic extremists,” a victory in the “war on terror” in Afghanistan would be impossible. Time is running out on the Bush-Cheney Administration, and pressure for Cheney’s ouster is growing within the United States. Musharraf, who has been fêted and honored by Washington since 9/11, must deliver that victory.

Now that the Red Mosque event has forced President Musharraf to take on the so-called Islamic extremists, by unleashing the Pakistani security forces on the Lal Masjid jihadis, and killing more than 100 of them, Washington has succeeded in virtually isolating Musharraf from a large portion of the population.

The Cheney cabal is also using other methods to exert pressure on Pakistan’s President. Washington is demanding that when Musharraf’s term comes to an end in October, he give up his uniform (as the Chief of Staff of the Army), or give up the Presidency. The U.S. Administration has coaxed Musharraf to allow the exiled former Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto, to become his Prime Minister, come October. This arrangement will have a significant amount of support within that segment of the Pakistani population which does not want military rule, and would like at least a democratic face, as a feel-good measure. There is, however, no doubt in most Pakistanis’ minds, that the military is the only functional institution in that country, thanks to American efforts in the Cold War days, to systematically undermine Pakistan’s democratic forces.

Chinese Concerns

The pressure from China is also significant. At least the timing of the raid on Lal Masjid was directed from Beijing. The Chinese have been particularly upset with Musharraf’s handling of the jihadis, because they have targeted the Chinese, who are working on infrastructure development and other economic activities in Pakistan.

On July 19, suicide bombers hit a convoy of Chinese workers in southern Pakistan, and a police academy in the north, killing 51 people and injuring more than 54, as further violence swept across the country. The Chinese workers’ convoy was passing through the main bazaar in Hub, a town in Baluchistan province, some 30 kilometers northwest of the port city of Karachi, when a moving car blew up next to a police vehicle, officials said. The suicide bomb did not kill any Chinese, but they were targets. The Chinese worked at a lead extraction plant in Dudhar in Baluchistan and were temporarily leaving the area for Karachi because of security concerns, police said.

In 2006, Chinese engineers were abducted in FATA under orders from Waziristan warlord Abdullah Mehsud. A number of Chinese engineers were killed in Baluchistan, and China has repeatedly pressured Musharraf to take action against the perpetrators. Musharraf has not done so, because of the dan-

gers he foresaw, and which in fact, have developed since the Lal Masjid event. While the Pakistani President has confessed that the FATA seminaries have been sheltering Uighur terrorists from China’s western province Xinjiang, opposition politicians in Pakistan heatedly deny that there are any foreigners in the tribal areas.

The Chinese Xinhua news agency reported as follows: “China on Tuesday [June 26, 2007] asked Pakistan to take further measures for the security of the Chinese people and businesses in the South Asian country. ‘We hope Pakistan will look into the terrorist attacks aiming at Chinese people and organizations as soon as possible and severely punish the criminals,’ the Chinese Minister of Public Security Zhou Yongkang told visiting Pakistani Interior Minister Aftab Ahmed Khan Sherpao. Sherpao’s visit came days after seven abducted Chinese—a couple and five of their women employees—were released in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad on Saturday night [June 23, 2007]. . . .”

The *Daily Times* of Lahore wrote in an editorial: “During his visit to Beijing, Sherpao got an earful from the Chinese Minister of Public Security, Zhou Yongkang, who asked Pakistan for the umpteenth time to protect Chinese nationals working in Pakistan. The reference was to the assault and kidnapping of Chinese citizens in Islamabad by the Lal Masjid vigilantes. The Chinese Minister called the Lal Masjid ‘mob terrorists’ who targeted the Chinese, and asked Pakistan to punish the criminals. Mr Sherpao, who must have regretted being in Beijing, lamely rejoined that Pakistan would take more rigorous action to safeguard the security of Chinese people and organizations in Pakistan.”

The *China Daily* reported on July 18: “China did not push Pakistan for operations against the Red Mosque, Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan Luo Zhaohui said. It is the consistent policy of China not to meddle in the domestic affairs of other countries, he told *The News*, a major Pakistani daily.” At the same time, following the completion of the Lal Masjid raid, China and the United States were the first to thank and congratulate President Musharraf.

The reason that China is so concerned about the rise of the jihadis in Pakistan, is not only the presence of Uighur rebels there, but the threat they pose to China’s plan to develop its western wing. To begin with, China has already invested significantly, and is keen to invest a whole lot more, to develop infrastructure within Pakistan for China’s access to the Persian Gulf. It is for this reason, that China has helped Pakistan

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financially to build the Gwadar Port in the southwestern tip of Baluchistan, almost touching Iran.

In addition, China wants to connect the Central Asian nations—Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgystan—through highways and railroads (wherever physically possible), and make them strong partners in trade and commerce. That infrastructure would also allow these land-locked Central Asian nations an access to the Arabian Sea, and beyond. The rise and dominance of the jihadis in Pakistan would ruin China's future plans, and that bothers Beijing more than anything else.

What Cheney Wants

It is evident that the Chinese interest lies in a stable Pakistan which, then, can integrate into an area of economic activity, along with a part of Central Asia and western China, over time. The Cheney cabal's interest, however, is not Pakistan's stability per se, but to secure a victory in Afghanistan and gain a permanent footing in Central Asia. The Pakistani jihadis are enemies, not only because they harbor, shelter, and train anti-American Afghans, but also because they could be a threat to the United States' and NATO's supply of arms and other equipment to the 50,000 foreign troops battling the anti-U.S. insurgents in Afghanistan. Pakistan's Karachi Port is the major entry point for the arms and ammunition used by the foreign troops in Afghanistan.

With no time at hand to slowly cull the jihadis, the Cheney cabal has now begun to exert pressure on President Musharraf to either launch a full-fledged invasion, by Pakistani troops, of the tribal agencies, or allow the foreign troops to move in and eliminate the insurgents.

Either way, Pakistan's President faces a grave danger. This danger is that of the revival of the Greater Pakhtoonistan issues. It should be remembered that the FATA tribal population is Pushtun, and the bordering Afghan provinces are also land of the Afghan Pushtuns. Imperial Britain, defeated decisively in two Afghan wars, had drawn a line on the sand, called the Durand Line, in the latter part of the 19th Century. No Afghan king or any other leader has accepted the Durand Line as the demarcation between Pakistan and Afghanistan. According to the Pushtuns, the Pushtun land, or Greater Pakhtoonistan, extends to the River Indus, which separates Pakistan's Punjab and Sindh provinces from the Northwest Frontier Province, FATA, and Baluchistan, in the West.

In other words, any military incursion into FATA, by Pakistani or foreign troops, with the intent of annihilating the tribal insurgents, and their backers and sympathizers, could lead to a secessionist movement, shedding the blood of thousands. President Musharraf knows the danger, but the question remains: Having travelled this far with the Bush Administration in its "war on terror," and having weakened and isolated himself in the process, will he be able to avoid traversing this dreaded path?