

Surrender or die

Pakistan's dictator threatens massacre at Islamabad mosque

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General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's US-backed military strongman, said Saturday that the armed Islamic clerics and militants who control Islamabad's Lal Masjid or Red Mosque must surrender or die.

"I want to say to the ones who have been left inside: they should come out and surrender, and if they don't, I am saying this here and now: they will be killed."

Musharraf's blunt threat was his first public pronouncement on the siege Pakistan's military is mounting of the Lal Masjid—a mosque-school complex situated less than a kilometer from the national parliament and in close proximity to other key government buildings, including the headquarters of Pakistan's security-intelligence agency.

The siege began in earnest last Tuesday, when fierce gun-battles between paramilitaries and Lal Masjid militants left 10 people, including a reporter and several passers-by, dead, and more than 150 people, many of them young madrassa students, injured.

But the mosque had already been encircled by hundreds of paramilitary Rangers for days, and the press had long been discussing whether and when the government would mount a security operation against the Lal Masjid. In late June, Musharraf charged that heavily-armed militants with ties to the banned Jaish-i-Muhammad [Army of Muhammad] and al-Qaeda were ensconced in the mosque complex.

Musharraf, who doubles as Pakistan's President and Chief of Armed Services, offered no proof. But over the past six months, the Lal Masjid's leaders have repeatedly, and with increasing boldness, flouted the government's authority and fomented attacks on persons they accuse of violating sharia law.

Pakistani authorities concede that 20 people have died in the siege to date, including a Ranger and an army colonel. However, Abdul Rashid Ghazi, the mosque's deputy director and current leader, told GEO television Saturday that there are dozens more dead within the Lal Masjid complex. Various other media sources have reported others inside the mosque as alleging that the death toll is many times greater than the government tally.

Many of those caught up in the siege are young women and boys who are students at the two madrassas associated with the Lal Masjid. The Jamia Hafsa seminary for girls is part of the mosque compound. The Jamia Faridia, a school for boys and young men, lies several kilometers away. It was taken over by the military, apparently without incident, early Saturday morning.

An estimated 1,200 students have fled the Lal Masjid compound since the siege began, but hundreds of people, many of them school children, are thought to remain. Ghazi claims that close to two thousand people are still inside the mosque complex. Pakistani authorities place the number at under 500, but concede many of these are unarmed, women and children.

Hundreds of people—many of them from the poorer, remoter regions of

Pakistan from which the Lal Masjid draws most of its students—have gathered near the siege site because they know or fear that a son, daughter, or other relative is still inside the besieged mosque complex.

They are terrified the siege will end in the Pakistani military storming the mosque and a terrible slaughter of innocents.

Such a horrific outcome is a real possibility, given the Pakistani military's long record of human rights atrocities and the government's indifference to the suffering of the Pakistani people, whether from poverty or from natural disasters like the cyclone that recently ravaged Baluchistan—and given the reactionary obscurantist politics of the Lal Masjid leaders.

On Wednesday, Pakistani security forces apprehended the head of the Lal Masjid—Abdul Rashid Ghazi's brother, Maulana Abdul Aziz—trying to flee the complex clad in a burqa. Aziz, who previously had made frequent strident speeches in favor of jihad and martyrdom, subsequently appeared on television and urged his brother and those remaining in the mosque complex to surrender.

To date, Abdul Rashid Ghazi has rejected such appeals, proclaiming martyrdom preferable to surrender. Ghazi has called on the government to grant him and his followers free passage to leave the mosque complex or to suspend the military operation while placing him on trial.

Meanwhile, Musharraf, as Saturday's bellicose speech exemplifies, is taking evident delight in demonstrating his credentials as a strongman.

Parts of Pakistan's capital now resemble an armed camp, with thousands of Rangers and regular troops mobilized outside the Lal Masjid. A complete curfew has been imposed on the neighborhood in which the mosque is situated, with most residents let out only to buy necessities.

For days there has been intermittent, and sometimes heavy, gunfire and explosions. Through controlled explosions, the military has punctured holes in parts of the compound's outer-walls, with the ostensible aim of helping students to escape the besieged complex. But the bringing down of the walls would also facilitate a military strike.

The military operation against the Lal Masjid represents a sharp change of course for the increasingly shaky Musharraf regime.

Pakistan's liberal press has frequently contrasted the authorities' failure to assert the state's writ in the face of the open defiance of the Lal Masjid's leadership, with their readiness to use state repression and murderous violence in trying to stamp out the anti-government protests staged by opposition parties and civil liberties and workers' groups. On May 12-13, more than 40 persons were killed in Karachi when goons organized by the MQM—a party allied with Musharraf and the leading element in the Karachi municipal and Sind provincial governments—staged armed attacks to prevent a rally protesting Musharraf's suspension of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court on trumped-up corruption charges.

Till last week the government ignored or temporized with Maulana

Abdul Aziz and Abdul Rashid Ghazi, even as they became increasingly bold in fomenting and threatening violence against the public and the state. Over the past six months, the brothers directed their followers to occupy government buildings arms-in-hand, declared that they were establishing their own courts to impose sharia law, and incited the Lal Masjid madrassa students to threaten and attack persons, such as shopkeepers selling CDs and videos, partaking in “un-Islamic activities.” In answer to government complaints about the actions of the Lal Masjid activists, several police officers were briefly abducted. The two brothers also repeatedly threatened to unleash suicide bombers in the event of any action by security forces against the Lal Masjid.

Claiming to be concerned about the potential loss of life—a concern that clearly did not apply to its political opponents in Karachi—the government insisted that the only possible solution to the Lal Masjid agitation was a negotiated one. Towards that end, several sets of negotiations were held and at one point in April a deal seemed imminent over the Islamicists’ complaints about the demolition of various mosques for urban renewal projects.

Some leaders of the MMA—an alliance of six Islamic parties—openly supported many of the Lal Masjid activists’ actions, including their intimidation campaign in support of sharia law. Although the MMA is part of the “opposition,” it is a sometimes ally of Musharraf and the government. In 2003 it helped pass constitutional amendments strengthening Musharraf’s powers as president and giving a fig-leaf of legitimacy to his 1999 coup. In Baluchistan, it is to this day part of a coalition government with the pro-Musharraf PML (Q).

Critics of the Musharraf regime have argued that the government deliberately allowed the Lal Masjid agitation to grow, so as to use the threat of the Islamic right to intimidate the populace into acquiescing to military rule and to impress the US and British governments that the current regime is the only alternative to the “Talibanization” of Pakistan or, at the very least, political chaos.

Certainly the Pakistani military and security-intelligence apparatus have a long history of sponsoring, supporting, and manipulating the Islamic right—using it as a bulwark against the working class and left within Pakistan and as a means of extending Islamabad’s geo-political influence in Afghanistan, Kashmir, and India.

The Lal Masjid itself has long been patronized by senior Pakistani military, government and political leaders and has been part of the nexus that tied the Pakistani state to the Islamicist right, both the parliamentary religious parties and various armed groups.

According to BBC News, Maulana Abdullah, the former head of the mosque and the father of the two brothers who now head it—Abdul Rashid Ghazi and Maulana Abdul Aziz—“was said to be very close” to General Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistan’s dictator from 1977 to 1988. Haq seized power in a military coup, then emerged as the champion of the “Islamization” of Pakistan and the pivot of the US campaign to finance and arm the anti-Soviet mujahedin in Afghanistan.

Zia’s son, Ejaz-ul-Haq, is the Religious Affairs minister in the current Pakistani government

Undoubtedly a factor in Musharraf’s decision to mount a military operation against the Lal Masjid militants was their recent kidnapping of seven Chinese nationals, whom they accused of running a brothel. The Chinese government, which is a vital military and economic partner of Islamabad, strongly protested the Pakistani government’s failure to protect its nationals.

But the timing of the military operation also serves the government’s ends, by distracting attention from the mounting agitation against Musharraf’s attempt to pave the way for his “re-election” by sacking the chief justice. (Although Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry was party to a number of rulings sanctioning Musharraf’s coup, he recently issued several judgments that cut across the government’s agenda, causing

Musharraf to deem him “unreliable.”)

On Monday, the day before violence broke out at the Lal Masjid, the Supreme Court issued a stunning rebuke of the government—a rebuke that suggests the court, which hitherto has been infamous for its toadying before the military, might well reject its trumped-up corruption case against Chief Justice Chaudhry.

The Court denounced documents the government had submitted in support of its case against the Chief Justice, saying they contained scurrilous accusations against him and other judges. It also condemned the security establishment for spying on the judiciary and ordered the Intelligence Bureau to conduct a sweep of the courts and judges’ homes for spying devices.

Even more importantly, the confrontation with the Lal Masjid dovetails with Musharraf’s attempt to salvage his regime by striking a deal with Benazir Bhutto and her Pakistani People’s Party. The PPP presents itself as a progressive, even “socialist” party, but when in office in the late 1980s and 1990s, it imposed the dictates of the IMF and is now openly courting the Bush administration.

The PPP, which opposes the feudalist and anti-women’s agenda of the religious right, has said that it would be willing to enter into a partnership with Musharraf on the purported grounds of defending secularism against the Islamicists. The Bush administration, for its part, has signaled that it would favor a deal under which Bhutto or her nominee became prime minister, while Musharraf remained president.

Bhutto was conspicuous in her absence from the Multi-Party Conference held in London this past weekend with the aim of uniting the opposition parties against the Musharraf regime. While the PPP did send a delegation, it made clear that its MPs will not join those of the other parties in resigning their seats in the national and provincial legislatures so as to deny Musharraf the quorum he needs to have them (the legislatures form the presidential college under Pakistan’s constitution) declare him re-elected president till 2012. The existing legislatures were chosen in 2002 in elections that the military grossly manipulated.

The *Dawn*, the most prominent press voice of Pakistani liberalism, has given its full support to the military operation against the Lal Masjid and for some time has been urging the coming together of “moderate forces” against the Islamic right, even while conceding that elements like the Lal Masjid are a “Frankenstein monster”—given life by the Haq dictatorship, the Pakistani’s elite’s anti-Soviet alliance with the Reagan administration and its constant quest for geo-political advantage against India.

Unquestionably, the Islamicists are enemies of the working class and democracy. But they cannot be fought on a progressive basis by aligning with the Bush administration-backed Musharraf regime—a military dictatorship in alliance with imperialism—or through the Pakistani capitalist state.

In the absence of an independent political movement of the working class that combines the struggle against dictatorship with the struggle for social equality and advances an internationalist, anti-imperialist perspective, the Islamic right will continue to fatten off the genuine grievances of the Pakistani masses over the crimes of US imperialism in Iraq, Afghanistan and around the world and over the ever-deepening poverty and economic insecurity that have resulted from the neo-liberal agenda of the Pakistani bourgeoisie, the PPP and the *Dawn* included.



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