

Musharraf lauds Lal Masjid massacre

Keith Jones
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In a nationally televised address Thursday evening, Pakistan's US-backed dictator, General Pervez Musharraf, defended the Pakistani military's storming of the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque), threatened military action against any madrassa (Islamic school) "used for extremism," and promised to strengthen paramilitary and police forces in the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP).

The general feigned regret at the large number who perished in the 36-hour battle that ended Wednesday afternoon with the military wresting control of the Lal Masjid, a mosque-school complex in central Islamabad. "Unfortunately," declared Musharraf, "we have been up against our own people ... They had strayed from the right path and become susceptible to terrorism."

Among the many things Musharraf omitted to say was that he personally scotched a deal Monday night to peacefully end the military's siege of the Lal Masjid and that the mosque and its leaders had long been part of a nexus linking the Pakistani military-intelligence apparatus to various Islamicist militia groups.

The reality is Musharraf and his military regime staged a massacre. They deployed twelve thousand troops, including many of Pakistan's elite units, in the heavily-populated center of Islamabad, then ordered an attack on the Lal Masjid that included artillery barrages, even though they knew that hundreds of unarmed people, including women and children, likely remained inside.

Through this bloodletting, Musharraf hoped to achieve two objectives: to please the Bush administration, which has been pressing Islamabad to intensify military action against pro-Taliban elements inside Pakistan even at the cost of antagonizing the country's tribal and Pashtun minorities; and, second, to divert attention from, and increase his options in dealing with, the mounting opposition to his attempt to stage-manage his "re-election" as president.

Less than two months ago, more than forty people were killed in Karachi when the pro-Musharraf MQM with the connivance of security forces mounted armed attacks on persons gathering to welcome "suspended" Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry.

Just how many people died in the storming of the Lal Masjid complex remains an unanswered question close to two days after the military announced it had seized the mosque.

Pakistani authorities claim to have found 75 bodies in the Lal Masjid and put the total number of dead in the eight-day siege at around 108, including ten military personnel. Eighty-five of the 108 deaths reputedly came during Tuesday's and Wednesday's storming of the Lal Masjid.

But the real death toll is likely much larger. The *Dawn* reported Thursday that an unnamed source who had visited the Lal Masjid and the adjacent Jamia Hafsa seminary for women shortly after the army takeover said the floors were littered with corpses wrapped in white shrouds: "I could not count them but they must be in the hundreds."

Dawn also observed that "a promised media trip to the site was put off a day, fuelling speculation that the government was buying time to remove some telltale signs."

Ever since the military launched its action to seize the mosque, reporters have been barred from the three closest hospitals, so as prevent them from gauging the number of dead and wounded.

For hours after the fighting had ended, the government and military insisted that no, or next to no, women and children had been killed. Later they conceded that some of the 19 bodies too charred to determine gender or age might be those of women and children.

The government's claims are belied by the scores, possibly hundreds, of people who continue to search desperately for relatives, many of them teenage boys and girls, who were enrolled in one of the two seminaries affiliated with the Lal Masjid and who are now missing.

Acknowledging the widespread public skepticism about the number of casualties, Information Minister Mohammad Ali Durrani insisted Thursday, "There's no cover-up. Why should we?"

Reporters who toured the mosque complex Thursday afternoon described it as a battlefield, with bullet-riddled, blood-stained, and in some cases blown-out walls. Military spokesmen said this was evidence of the intensity of the resistance they faced.

A principal government justification for the assault was the reputed presence of "foreign militants" in the complex. This claim was vehemently denied by Abdul Rashid Ghazi, the younger of the two brothers who led the Lal Masjid. Ghazi, who was killed during the storming of the mosque, became the leader of the mosque militants after his brother was arrested on the second day of the siege.

Musharraf, in his speech to the nation Thursday, repeated the charge that foreign fighters had been ensconced in the Lal Masjid, but offered no proof.

Security forces remain on high alert across the country for possible reprisal attacks. On Thursday five people including three police were killed in a suicide bombing in the Swat district of NWFP, and two government officials were killed in a second suicide bombing in North Waziristan, which is part of Pakistan's tribal belt.

The NWFP government, which is formed by the MMA, a six party alliance of Islamic parties, has decreed a three-day official period of mourning to commemorate all those killed in siege and storming of the Lal Masjid. Since Tuesday there have been demonstrations in many NWFP towns, with protesters denouncing Musharraf as a US puppet.

Opposition to the US government due to its current wars of conquest in Afghanistan and the Iraq and long history of supporting military dictatorships in Pakistan cuts across Pakistan regionally and, to a large degree, socially. But it is especially strong in NWFP, where the majority Pashtun population has strong ethnic and cultural ties to Afghanistan.

The Bush administration, meanwhile, has strongly praised the Pakistani government's brutal suppression of the Lal Masjid militants. Speaking Tuesday as the military operation was in full swing, Bush professed his admiration for the dictator Musharraf and his efforts to build "democracy" in Pakistan: "I like him and I appreciate him."

Various liberal voices like the *New York Times* that have been critical of Musharraf of late for not doing enough to suppress support for the Taliban insurgency in Pakistan have also welcomed the military operation against the Lal Masjid.

The US is deeply implicated in the Lal Masjid massacre and not only because the political establishment has been demanding Musharraf do more to support the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan.

The US played a pivotal role in encouraging the Pakistani military and political elite in using Islamic fundamentalism as a bulwark against the working class and left and in developing ties to armed Islamacist groups in furtherance of US Cold War aims. These ties Islamabad subsequently used to further its own geo-political ambitions in Afghanistan, Kashmir and India-proper.

The US gave the green light to General Zia, who would proclaim "Islamicization" his principal policy, to seize power in a coup in 1977. Soon after, Zia's regime emerged as the principal conduit for CIA and Saudi support for the mujahedeen in Afghanistan.

US priorities shifted with the end of the Cold War, but the Pakistani military-intelligence apparatus continued to nurture and expand its relations with various Islamic militias.

The prestigious Lal Masjid mosque, which is situated in the center of Islamabad in close proximity to many government buildings, including the headquarters of Pakistan's secret police (the Inter-Services Intelligence Agency), became an important part of this nexus.

The Lal Masjid was long led by the father of Abdul Rashid Ghazi, Maulana Abdullah—a man said to have enjoyed a close relationship with General Zia. And both Ghazi and his brother are known to have had links to the Pakistani military-security establishment.

Since seizing power in 1999, Musharraf has been forced to make a series of sharp shifts, under US pressure, ratcheting back the military-security apparatuses' relations with Islamicist groups. Most dramatically, in September 2001, in response to US threats to bomb Pakistan back to the Stone Age, Musharraf withdrew Islamabad's support for the Taliban regime and agreed to allow the US to use Pakistan as a staging area for the conquest of Afghanistan. But Islamabad has also been pressured by Washington to curtail its support for the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir.

These steps have caused frictions within the Pakistani establishment, especially given the sidelining of the Pashtuns within Afghanistan's US-installed government and the failure of Washington to prod India into making any meaningful concessions over Kashmir.

The full story of how and why the Lal Masjid Islamacists came into collision with the Musharraf regime has yet to be told. Some of their actions, such as voicing support for pro-Taliban elements in the NWFP and tribal areas, drawing attention to the growing number of "disappeared," and kidnapping police and Chinese nationals as part of a campaign for *sharia* law, clearly cut across the government's agenda.

Lucrative property was also an issue, with government authorities claiming facilities connected with the Lal Masjid and other Islamabad mosques were built illegally.

The vast majority of the students at the two seminaries affiliate with

the Lal Masjid, many of whom participated in an armed agitation in Islamabad in support of *sharia* law, it needed to be added, come from the most impoverished regions of Pakistan. The spread of madrassas is not due just to the political support they have enjoyed since the Zia dictatorship. It is also a product of the wretched poverty that prevails in Pakistan and the abysmal state of public education.

That said, there is much evidence to show Pakistani authorities allowed the Lal Masjid agitation to develop, ignoring for months actions that challenged the government's legitimacy. As numerous observers have pointed out, it is ludicrous to suppose that large quantities of arms and ammunition could have been smuggled into the Lal Masjid unbeknownst to the ISI high command, whose plush offices are within easy walking distance.

At the very least, the Musharraf regime saw the Islamic agitation in the capital as a means of intimidating the working class and democratic opposition to military rule.

After temporizing and conniving with the Lal Masjid agitation, Musharraf cynically and brutally turned against it, seeing its bloody suppression as a means of both demonstrating to Washington his determination to heed the US's demand he crack down on Taliban support in Pakistan and of perpetuating his dictatorship.

As part of his attempts to broker a power-sharing deal with Benazir Bhutto and her Pakistan People's Party (PP), the general is trying to cast himself as a "secularist" and advocate of "enlightened" Islam. Bhutto, for her part, has repeatedly indicated that she is prepared to ally with the general in the name of opposing the Islamic right, if a satisfactory division of the spoils of office can be hammered out.

Bhutto's PPP welcomed the military action against the Lal Masjid and has refused to join forces with the most of the other opposition parties, including Nawaz Sharif's PML (N) and the MMA, in a new alliance. The All-Parties Democratic Movement has called anti-Musharraf rallies for next month, but the PPP, which has increased its interaction with the Bush administration in recent months, has declared the time not propitious for a popular agitation.

Should it prove impossible for him to strike a deal with the PPP, Musharraf has the option of using the government's confrontation with Islamic "extremists" as the pretext for imposing emergency rule and thereby short-circuiting the elections promised for this fall.



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