



COMMENTARY

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Pakistan: Showdown at the Red Mosque

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The Pakistan government's showdown at the Lal Masjid, or Red Mosque, should provide a much needed boost to the government's authority and discredit the radical leaders of the mosque. This is good news for Pakistan and for Musharraf, though it will not end the political crisis he faces. For the United States, it is time to recalibrate its policy to focus on Pakistan, not just on Musharraf, and to encourage Musharraf to speed up the transition to political rule.

The mosque's leadership and the students at both of its associated schools have mounted a steadily increasing challenge to all forms of government authority, especially for the past six months. The most dramatic recent event was a "raid" by people from the mosque on a massage parlor, in which they seized a number of Chinese nationals, including scantily clad women. Following the major incidents, the government sent political operatives in to negotiate a viable set of ground rules – and the operatives came away empty-handed.

This situation was a direct affront not just to Musharraf but to the basic authority of the Pakistan government. Islamabad is normally a quiet town completely under the government's thumb, popularly known as the "federal village." This made the challenge to the government even more embarrassing.

The government was reluctant to move in, but finally had no choice. It deployed the army around the mosque and schools, pressed the mosque leadership to surrender, offered a financial benefit to any students who left, and cut off water and electricity to the surrounding neighborhood. While the siege has not ended and there could be further fighting, at this point the government seems set to resolve the matter on its terms. The capture of the mosque's leader as he tried to escape wearing a woman's burqa provided both comic relief and humiliation to the mosque authorities.

What does this episode mean for Pakistan's future? The government's hesitation to take action reflected both poor intelligence and its own severely eroded authority. The protracted period in which the mosque was able to thumb its nose at the government with no consequences reinforced the impression that the government and the army were weak and indecisive. The government in turn missed opportunities to face down the mosque authorities at an earlier stage, when the risks of action might have been appreciably lower. The government also missed the chance to win back at least some of its opponents.

When the crackdown finally came, it started with a classic show of force by the Pakistan Army rangers, but quickly turned into a waiting game, with the government applying strong but not exclusively military pressure. As of July 5, the death toll is estimated at 16 to 20, with injured people about ten times that number. If these events end in a clear surrender by the mosque authorities, and if they do not spark more generalized violence, the government will emerge looking more decisive and adept than it has in some time. The army will repair some of the damage to its institutional reputation. And the government will have shown that religious extremists are not able to flout its authority with impunity.

This is good news indeed for a government that has been in serious trouble for the past couple of months. In the longer term, it is also good news for Pakistan, in that a successful operation will make it easier for both this government and its eventual successors to enforce basic law and order.

But Musharraf and his government are not out of the woods. The showdown at the Red Mosque was only one of the four dramas affecting the government's future. The other three are still in play. The Supreme Court is still considering motions connected with Musharraf's decision to suspend the chief justice. The opposition galvanized by this decision

is still on the move, and a parade of procedural decisions will provide many opportunities for them to make their presence felt. Pakistan's judges now feel strong popular pressure to be independent and not bend to the will of the government. The second drama, fighting between government forces and groups friendly to the Taliban in the provinces bordering Afghanistan, is still going on, with at least two suicide bombings in the last 24 hours. Sympathizers of the Red Mosque as well as Afghan-oriented parts of the militant movement may be looking for more opportunities to make their presence felt. The third drama, sectarian and provincial fissures, is a long-standing systemic problem in Pakistan, and was exacerbated by the violence in Karachi in May.

Musharraf has shown that he can take effective action. He still needs to deal with a political system that now expects a credible election, meaning one in which his opponents believe the deck has not been stacked against them. Whether Musharraf remains as president, and how his presidency or his post-presidency look, depends on his willingness to take that chance.

The key U.S. interest is that the government of Pakistan – this one and its successors – be willing and able to prevent terrorism and chaos from spreading eastward out of Afghanistan. This means, in the first instance, that they must be able to keep order, and that their authority must be credible in the eyes of the Pakistani people. This, rather than the presence or absence of Musharraf, is the main criterion. The United States needs to focus its policy on Pakistan, not just on Musharraf.

Musharraf's political missteps in the past few months have badly tarnished his legitimacy. Resolving the Red Mosque dispute may help him regain it, but ultimately he will need to pass the test of credible elections later this year. His continued leadership will have value for the United States only if he is able to regain his legitimacy. After the events of the past four months, Musharraf's best shot at doing this is to take his chances on genuinely credible elections, and at a minimum to run for president as a civilian. The United States should be privately encouraging him to do this, and publicly emphasizing its interest in the people of Pakistan.

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