

## 8 / Red Mosque

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**O**n July 10, 2007, Pakistani soldiers stormed the Red Mosque complex of Islamabad in an assault that killed some two hundred people, thus ending months of aggressive and well-publicized provocations by the students and teachers of its men's and women's seminaries. Instead of posing a challenge to the Pakistani state, however, the assorted kidnappings and armed incursions carried out by residents of the Red Mosque, not to mention the threat of suicide bombings, had presented it with a symbolic confrontation in the media. Indeed, the mosque's religious radicalism in the carefully controlled environment of the capital compromised Pakistan's security far less than the secular struggle for autonomy in its restive province of Balochistan did. The entire incident, therefore, had more the character of a warning than a problem of national security, such that Pakistani opinion both for and against the army's action continues even now to be dominated by rumors that the whole crisis had been staged, whether by the government or by the militants themselves.

But if it was the mosque's performance of impunity in the glare of media attention that had challenged Pakistan's government (or rather the law-and-order image that gave its military rulers their legitimacy), the violent resolution of this confrontation by its army was equally theatrical in nature. It was no accident that this military resolution had the code name Operation Silence, implying thereby its aim to muzzle rather than merely control dissent. So the army's siege of the Red Mosque, and the negotiated settlement that Pakistani mediators had nearly reached with its leaders, the brothers Maulana 'Abd al-'Aziz and 'Abd al-Rashid Ghazi, were also broken off for demonstrative reasons. Possibly encouraged by the United States, General Musharraf seems to have decided that these men and women needed to be taught a lesson, not for the sake of a principle but in order to secure his own reputation as someone who did not cut deals with terrorists. In seeming to break with the long-established policy of tightening and loosening the government's control of militant outfits for reasons of state, Musharraf might have been capitulating to the American policy of refusing to deal with these groups, a move that was backed by many in Pakistan's liberal establishment, who have a long history of supporting military rule to safeguard their social privileges against the demands of Muslims and Marxists alike.

Searching for a regional precedent to Operation Silence, the Indian press immediately drew comparisons between the Red Mosque and the Golden Temple, which was attacked on Indira Gandhi's orders during Operation Bluestar in 1984. Occupied by armed divines and their students demanding Sikh autonomy, this shrine was besieged by Indian troops and eventually stormed, with the loss of over four hundred lives. Shortly thereafter Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, some four thousand Sikhs were massacred in Delhi, and the Sikh-dominated province of Punjab was given over to an insurgency that lasted a decade and sent many thousands to their deaths. While Operation Silence certainly follows the precedent of Operation Bluestar, it also suffers in the comparison. Similarly, the Red Mosque episode suffers in comparison with the storming of Mecca's Great Mosque by French-backed Saudi troops in 1979, which evicted the armed supporters of a self-proclaimed messiah and killed hundreds. In a video released on September 20, 2007, Osama bin Laden added another precedent to Pakistan's attack on the

Red Mosque, which he compared to the destruction of the Babri Masjid by Hindu militants in 1992, an event that was preceded and followed by riots and massacres in many parts of India. Unlike its more illustrious predecessors, including Srinagar's Charar-e Sharif shrine and Hazratbal mosque, both of which were besieged by Indian troops after being occupied by militants in 1995 and 1996, respectively, the Red Mosque was not a particularly sacred or even well-known site, and rather than demanding a separate state or proclaiming a messiah, its defenders wanted only to "clean up" society in the manner of NGOs, citizens' groups, and other do-gooders.

Comparing those holed up in the Red Mosque to the Taliban or al-Qaida is also misplaced. For one thing, their kidnappings and forcible closing of immoral businesses were attempts to court publicity that resulted not in the meting out of any Islamic punishments so much as in the almost Maoist "reeducation" and subsequent release of alleged prostitutes. And for another, the presence of large numbers of armed and veiled women at the Red Mosque harked back to the images and participation of women in the revolutionary Shiism of Iran or Lebanon rather than to the masculine character of Sunni militancy, especially of the anti-Shiite kind that we are told dominated the Red Mosque. Neither of the institution's leaders, for example, made any anti-Shia statements in the numerous interviews they gave to the press throughout its crisis. So in an interview with Al Jazeera, the last filmed on the mosque's premises before Operation Silence began, 'Abd al-Rashid Ghazi went so far as to discount the received wisdom about his father having been killed in either a sectarian or a domestic quarrel, blaming his assassination on the government instead. Moreover, he immediately contradicted Al Jazeera reporter Ragueh Omaar's description of the Lal Masjid as a "conservative" institution. Ghazi rejected this appellation by pointing to the institution's women's madrasa, which he claimed not only was the world's largest, but also included English and science as part of its curriculum. And even though the mobilization of women in Pakistan is characteristic of national movements, whether represented by secular organizations like the Pakistan People's Party or religious ones like the Jama'at-e Islami, their participation in both movements has always been minor and even cosmetic. For whether they are mobilized for religious or secular purposes, in moderate

or militant organizations, women's groups in South Asia tend to be Hindu instead of Muslim.

So the militarization of women and their deployment shoulder to shoulder with men in the Red Mosque was most unusual and probably derived from Iranian examples. This is also true of the only other militant women's organization among South Asian Muslims, the Dukhtar-e Millat, or Daughters of the Community, in the Indian portion of Kashmir, whose members are similarly occupied with doing things like shutting down video shops. Interesting in this respect is the fact that the Pakistani government chose to demolish the women's seminary once they had occupied the Red Mosque, as if trying in this way to reassert the masculine character of Muslim religiosity against the militants, who in turn protested vociferously against this effort to exclude women from their society. Indeed, as part of their reaction to the Red Mosque's storming, these militants embarked upon a remarkable program of building identically named mosques and women's seminaries in other parts of the country, thus championing the participation of women in education and public life for the first time. And this great transformation has been achieved at a single stroke, as it were, because it proceeds not from any ideological imperative but rather from a media event.

This mixing of genders and genealogies, in which nationalist and Shiite forms are grafted onto the traditionally masculine organization of Sunni militancy, seems to indicate the latter's breakdown into more generalized social groupings within the Red Mosque, suggesting that their militancy was individual rather than collective and amateur rather than professional. Instead of representing an ideological movement or constituting a militant group, these aggressive but disparate men and women would more correctly be described as forming a civil-society organization. Indeed, in statements and interviews before its storming, residents of the Red Mosque complex more often than not spoke about such civil-society issues as the lack of security, transparency, and equal opportunity in Pakistan rather than about any specifically religious subject, suggesting thereby the mutation of Sunni militancy into the kind of mobilization that is neither nationalist nor in fact militant in any professional way but perhaps nongovernmental. So in an interview given to Tom Lasseret of McClatchy Newspapers on June 17, 2007, in the run-up to the battle

over the Red Mosque, the soon-to-be-martyred Maulana 'Abd al-Rashid Ghazi voiced sentiments about the United States, a country he thought of as being inimical to Islam, that would not be out of place on the lips of anyone advocating international development: "How much money has been spent on the war on terror? If these billions had been spent on us, on basic education, on food, then we would love the Americans. The Americans are not getting benefit from Iraq or Afghanistan. Hatred will not bring you any positive results—hatred from Afghans, hatred from Iraqis, hatred from Pakistanis."<sup>1</sup> 'Abd al-Rashid Ghazi, in the frequent interviews he gave to the press by way of his mobile phone, even as Pakistani soldiers stormed the Lal Masjid and killed his mother, spoke in an Urdu that was heavily laced with English words about the need for "transparency," itself a key term among NGOs. His similarly revealing and self-consciously "final" statements were dedicated to such issues as urging abstention upon one of his companions at the mosque who had confessed to drinking alcohol. Typically these quotidian revelations, lacking any programmatic content and indicating the far-from-pious nature of some of the militants, were interrupted by unimaginative interviewers looking for newsworthy information like the numbers of dead and wounded. In all this the call for an Islamic order, whose Taliban-like character the global media had repeatedly emphasized, was invariably subordinated to civil-society concerns and voiced in the most nominal fashion. Here, for example, is what Ghazi had to say about such an Islamic order in the interview given to Tom Lasseret: "We don't care if Musharraf remains or not—we don't want to change the face, we want to change the system. . . . The system has failed; it is not working. The same people keep coming from the same families to rule the country, and they exploit everyone in Pakistan. We want to abolish this system; an Islamic system should be enforced. There comes a point when people stand up, when they rise up against the system."<sup>2</sup> Of course the nature of an Islamic order as defined by the Red Mosque's authorities was illustrated by the attacks led by burqa-clad women against video shops and alleged prostitutes, but these incidents were, after all, attempts to court publicity by offering the media completely stereotyped images of Muslim extremism drawn from around the world and put together randomly with no attempt at ideological uniformity. A closer look at the Red Mosque brings something quite different

into focus. For instance, the "co-ed" character of the mosque's seminary, which not only included large numbers of women but also sometimes put them in close proximity to men, was scandalous for a supposedly conservative Sunni institution. This scandal was made evident with the arrest of the Red Mosque's leader, Maulana 'Abd al-'Aziz, while trying to escape the premises disguised in a burqa, clutching a handbag, and according to some reports, wearing high-heeled shoes. What were high heels doing at the mosque anyway, and how had the divine learned to wear them? According to Pakistani officials, 'Abd al-'Aziz was spotted because of his height and paunch, though one of the women among whom he was hiding tried desperately to convince the soldiers who would search him that the divine was her "aunt."

Although masquerade and cross-dressing are forbidden in Muslim scripture, the burqa has become a secular garment widely adopted as a male and female disguise all over South Asia. Celebrities wear burqas to remain anonymous or gain publicity by being discovered under them, as an Indian pop singer who happens to be neither female nor Muslim did when visiting the Sufi shrine of Ajmer not long before the Red Mosque events. Suspected criminals also wear them to avoid media exposure when being presented in court. And so it was bizarre but not unprecedented that Maulana 'Abd al-'Aziz should have appeared in a television interview following his arrest still in a burqa, even going so far as to veil and then unveil his face as if to demonstrate his disguise or discovery. The attempt to humiliate and disgrace 'Abd al-'Aziz by this display, however, was undercut by his apparent willingness to be filmed in women's clothes as well as his smiling countenance throughout the interview. Rather than marking women with the sign of Muslim patriarchy, in other words, the burqa actually does the opposite and unmarks both men and women in such cases, thus proving that no sartorial practice is univocal in character.

All of this suggests that the Red Mosque was linked more to the everyday and even secular practices of modern life in the region than to any religious or cult behavior. This is made clear by the fact that it was the supposedly traditional Maulana 'Abd al-'Aziz who tried to escape the besieged institution, not his more modern brother Maulana 'Abd al-Rashid Ghazi, who had studied history at Pakistan's most prestigious university and had also worked both for UNESCO and for his country's

ministry of education. It was this Westernized man who announced his impending martyrdom to the world by sending a text message from his mobile phone. What we see here is an example of the gradual transformation, or at least flattening out, of Islamic militancy, which has in many parts of the world been weaned off its dependence on highly organized or institutional forms to become yet another kind of voluntary association that individuals join for their own reasons, often as part-time members rather than full-time radicals. What is interesting about this flattening out of militancy as it spreads through society, in other words, is the fact that it changes not so much into a popular or national movement as into a relatively open and undisciplined sort of activism within civil society.

This curious transformation was made evident by the failed suicide attack in Glasgow and the equally fruitless car bombings in London that occurred at the end of June 2007, coinciding with the Red Mosque crisis and separated from its assault by just over a week. Though they were highly educated professionals by occupation, the Indian, Jordanian, and Iraqi doctors involved in these incompetent actions betrayed a complete lack of professionalism in their militancy, which seems to have become some kind of extracurricular activity for them—though of course one of a rather conclusive sort. Indeed, Muhammad Haneef, an Indian doctor detained and then released in Brisbane for alleged links to his cousins and fellow doctors among the would-be terrorists in the UK, proclaimed his innocence to Australian police in a statement leaked to the press precisely by stressing his "professionalist" lifestyle and denying any association with militancy, which he tellingly described as an "extracurricular activity." In this sense these men's medical occupations had nothing to do with the terrorist attacks they had planned: the attacks simply represented an aspect of their social lives.

Naturally some kind of relationship must have existed between the public and private lives of these doctors, perhaps based on the notions of altruism and self-sacrifice that are meant to inform medical as much as terrorist practices, but my point is that the latter remained distinctly amateurish in character. And if such an attitude is understandable among individuals and small groups whose terrorism is essentially a do-it-yourself phenomenon, its novelty becomes apparent within a radical institution like the Red Mosque, whose leaders betrayed a notable lack

of professional certainty or ideological conviction. In his interview with Tom Lasserer, 'Abd al-Rashid Ghazi, when asked if the 9/11 attacks had altered his admiration for Osama bin Laden, responded with a remarkably provisional but entirely typical statement that recognized the plurality of militant behavior within a kind of terrorist civil society, while deferring any judgment about it:

It is a difference of opinion, but I am not saying he is wrong. I do not think innocent people should be targeted. He has his own argument. I'm not saying he's totally wrong. I am not convinced on this issue, but otherwise, yes, I am convinced by him. For example, there is an American enemy in Afghanistan and Iraq. I am convinced that American soldiers should be targeted and killed in whatever way possible. And in doing that, if some civilians are killed, but the main target is the enemy, it's OK. But if the main target is a market, is innocent people, then I do not agree. But both sides have their argument, both sides have their logic—there is no conclusion.<sup>3</sup>

Analysis of the Red Mosque events was dominated by the institution's apparently close relationship to the Pakistani state. Attention also focused on the government's supposed encouragement of the crisis in its initial phase, so as to divert attention from the popular movement building up around the refusal of the country's chief justice to accept his dismissal at General Musharraf's hands. There is no doubt some truth to both these allegations, with the breakdown of relations between government and militants only illustrating the impending breakdown of the regime as a whole. Like all military dictatorships, this regime compensated for its lack of popular support by relying upon a limited number of institutions and organizations in civil society. But if the movement of lawyers and other professional groups coalescing around the dismissed chief justice signaled the detachment of these former clients from Musharraf's regime, that of the Red Mosque's students and teachers signaled the corresponding detachment of the general's religious clients from his government. In this sense both secular and religious protesters belonged to the same movement, however opposed they might be to one another.

The provocative activities of the Red Mosque's students and teachers can be seen as attempts to occupy the arena of antigovernment struggle

in Pakistan's civil society, not least by frightening General Musharraf's secular opponents into supporting his military regime once again. After the storming of the Lal Masjid, these attempts were followed up in suicide attacks across the country, especially by militants targeting soldiers, policemen, and the ubiquitous Chinese technicians in the country to work on infrastructure projects. Importantly, these retaliatory attacks by militants both associated with and unconnected to the Red Mosque sought to share the limelight with this media event that had a global impact only because it happened to occur in Pakistan's capital within easy reach of the world's cameras. After all, no such reaction had been forthcoming following the army's far more destructive operations in Balochistan or the North West Frontier Province (as the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was then known). Militant retaliation for the Red Mosque assault, therefore, marked not the escalation of radicalism in Pakistan but, rather, its dispersal and splintering—for the coming together of such disparate ideas and practices indicates the fragmentation of Islamic militancy into a violent but pluralistic kind of civil-society activism.