

The Red Mosque Affair (Jul 07)

Recent government action against militant students at the Red Mosque in Islamabad has provoked reactions in Mansehra, the northern Pakistani mountain town where Jules and I spend most of our time these days - unless we're getting 'evacuated' to Islamabad. Read about our experience of the fallout from the latest front-page news from Pakistan.

Since some of you may have been following the recent front-page news of mayhem and terror in an Islamabad mosque, thought I'd give a quick update on these events and their effect on my Pakistan life.

For those of you who haven't seen the front-page news, here's the synopsis:

On Tuesday, July 3, armed clashes began in Islamabad between government security forces and students from a radical mosque, the Lal Masjid or Red Mosque, located in Islamabad's G-6 sector, barely two kilometers from government buildings (pic: the Red Mosque is in trees to foreground, or thereabouts, with govt buildings in the distance). Students from the seminaries affiliated with this mosque - Jamia Fareedia for the men and Jamia Hafsa for the women - had been acting out since early spring in an effort to bring their concept of strict Muslim, or sharia, law into effect in the capital.

One of their first actions was to take over a public library in protest of the government tearing down mosques built on encroached land. The reported thousands of burqa-clad female students inside the library eventually forced the government to accede to their demands. Emboldened by this success, male and female students, often carrying bamboo batons, kidnapped policemen, forced suspected brothel owners to 'repent,' and threatened to burn music and movie shops if the owners did not find alternative employment. In addition, the mosque leadership set up its own judicial court to hear cases according to sharia law, most famously producing a fatwa against a female Pakistani politician who impulsively hugged a male parachuting instructor during a visit to Europe, an act which effectively ruined her political career.

They went too far, though, when they kidnapped and briefly held several Chinese nationals working at a spa - Pakistan has too much of its economy wrapped up in ties with China to let such direct provocation go unchallenged. Police responded with increased security around the mosque, and a confrontation July 3 at a government office building near the Lal compound devolved into armed combat.

Since Jules is stationed in Mansehra - a mountain town on the Karakoram Highway several hours north of Islamabad - for the next few months, we followed the Islamabad action from afar through internet news sites and NGO and UN security emails. (pic: countryside outside of Mansehra City) By evening the mosque had been surrounded by police and commandos.

Around ten p.m. that night one of Jules' Pakistani co-workers showed up at the Mansehra guest house where we stay saying that a 'procession' in protest of the government's action against the Red Mosque had arrived in the suburb of Ghazikot where our guest house and her NGO's offices are both located. The procession had turned into a riot, he informed us, and a guard post at the entrance to the suburb, along with an NGO vehicle or two, were going up in flames. We spent a tense hour or two, then, till we heard the good news that the procession had turned back and that the vehicles targeted did not belong to Jules' organization.

Unsure if more violent reactions might occur, we left Mansehra and drove to Islamabad early Wednesday morning. This move may seem counter-intuitive, 'evacuating' to the very place where the armed students faced off with government forces, but Islamabad is a much bigger place with more travel and security options. In Mansehra there is only one road out of town - if it's blocked you're stuck - and we white people stick out so much more than in Islamabad.

Islamabad was pretty quiet, actually, fewer people out and about and more police on hand. By the time we arrived on Wednesday the mosque militants were completely cordoned off in their compound about two kilometers from our house, and there were no reports of violence outside of that small area. For the rest of the week the government stayed their hand against an all-out attack, giving time for the reported thousands of students inside to come out. Many of them did surrender peacefully, religious education-seekers caught up in an armed battle not of their own choosing.

Into the weekend Jules and I fell asleep to the distant sound of periodic small arms fire, with an occasional big explosion thrown in for good measure. On Monday, with the situation fairly stable as government negotiators tried to reach a peaceful solution to the standoff, Jules received the ok to return to Mansehra, and we did so that afternoon.

Mansehra has been quiet this week, with no reported protests or violence either in the city, the small towns of the countryside, or the Ghazikot suburb where we live. Quiet despite the violent end of the standoff in Islamabad - troops attacked the mosque compound early Tuesday morning. Fighting continued well into Wednesday, as militants put up fierce resistance and used the labyrinthine complex to their advantage. The guns are silent now, with around one hundred reported dead.

While the government has been keeping journalists from accessing hospitals or seeing dead bodies, they made no secret that Maulana Abdul Rashid Ghazi, one of the mosque's two brother-leaders, was killed in crossfire during the attack. This news, as well as the violent end of the standoff, have sent conservative groups sympathetic to Lal Masjid into a period of mourning. Many fear that this mourning may lead to a period of violent protest, and indeed a few leaders have been publicly calling for armed action against the government. There have been a few isolated attacks on police or army troops in the last few days, especially in the conservative northern areas. Such attacks are not unusual, however, and it is difficult to say if they are in direct response to the Lal violence.

More troubling to us, a few days ago a crowd hundreds strong ransacked NGO offices (not Jules' organization) in

Batagram, a town a few hours north of Mansehra. Though the current grievance of conservative groups is with the Pakistani government directly, there is a tradition of lashing out in anger against Western institutions (such as international NGO's) during protests, particularly when they present convenient targets. This is why the procession came to Ghazikot that Tuesday night a week and a half ago - the suburb is the center for international NGO's responding to the 2005 earthquake.

Today is Friday, the traditional holy day for Muslims; also the 13th, traditional trouble day for Western superstitions. Protests in Pakistan tend to happen on Fridays, since maulana's can coordinate with their followers during afternoon prayer services. Jules and I have strict instructions not to leave the house today and to limit our public movements for the rest of the weekend. We were given the option of going to Islamabad, but the same don't-go-out-of-the-house rules applied there, so we decided to stay put.

Except for the Friday sermons echoing from mosque loudspeakers this afternoon, Ghazikot (picture left) has been quiet, almost eerily so. Everyone seems to be staying inside, waiting, hoping nothing crazy happens.

Pakistan is at a crossroads, I think. The Musharaff government seems intent on pressing its advantage against conservative militants now that the operation at Lal Masjid has ended in its favor with a minimum of public outcry. The Red Mosque leaders brought little positive credit to themselves during the operation - the one brother was arrested trying to escape in a burqa (a bizarre and cowardly act that also earned condemnation for its hypocrisy - a man who preached strict separation of male and female donning women's clothes) and the remaining brother came across as intractable, egotistically bent on his own martyrdom.

By contrast the government seemed reasoned and restrained, waiting a week before pressing an all-out attack. Musharaff now has the political leverage, at least for a time, to take action against radical mosques and madrassahs (religious schools). It remains to be seen whether he can loose the moderate Islamic voice captive for so long to the threats of religious extremists, and whether those extremists will, facing the discredit of the Lal fiasco, turn their energy toward peaceful political participation in the upcoming elections and away from violent separatism.

On this Friday in Ghazikot, we stay in the house surfing the net and checking our email, and hope for the peaceful route.

(Don't worry, nothing too bad can happen in a town of sunflowers and concrete hearts. :)