

Scenario 46

'OPERATION SILENCE' AT RED MOSQUE (2007)

In mid 2011, Gen Musharraf, permanently settled in London, vowed to go back to Pakistan on 23rd March 2012, because [as per his miscalculated assessment] the poor people of Pakistan at large and some fools need him. He was totally lost, misinformed and misplaced. In mid December 2011, he again reiterated that he would be landing there in January 2012; again a misguided belief he was adhering to. The secret reports were there that he was urging his ex-subordinate General and at present the Army Chief Gen Kayani to provide him shelter and immunity from the arrest warrants in Nawab Akbar Bugti's & Benazir Bhutto's murder cases; might be he had got clearance but a big question mark prevailed; now the January 2012 had passed long ago.

The Guardian of 2nd August 2007 had rightly narrated a story in the back drop of *Lal Masjid* (Red Mosque) episode in which 102 people [as per government's press release 68] had died on 10th July 2007. On the same day, there was a great debate in the National Assembly on the issue pointing towards the portrait of Mr Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, on the wall. The paper wrote:

'On 14th August 1947 Jinnah founded Pakistan in the hope of forging a homeland where the subcontinent's Muslims could live in peace and harmony. Sixty years later, it was going badly wrong. The military ruled the country for about 36 years and in 2007 the situation was the same when Pakistan was being headed by a dictatorial and unpopular General named Pervez Musharraf. Huge protests had filled the streets, the courts were defiant and fearing the Taliban control over the tribal belt; al-Qaeda and the United States were threatening to use force.

Suicide blasts had rocked the big cities and worse was to come. The western media had reached a conclusion that the country hasn't had a crisis of this magnitude since the 1970s when East Pakistan split off and Bangladesh came into being. End of the country was being spelled endangering a civil war.'

On 7th July 2007, Gen Musharraf sent a message to the Islamic militants holed up in *Lal Masjid* (Red Mosque) Islamabad to 'Surrender or Die'. Negotiations started between the two factions without interruption and former Prime Minister Ch Shuja'at Hussain and a group of *Ulema* continued to convince Maulana Aziz and Ghazi Abdul Rashid, the custodians of the Red Mosque, but of no avail. Ch Shuja'at Hussain had offered militant mosque leader Maulana A Rashid Ghazi one last chance to surrender. *'I am returning very disappointed,'* said Mr Hussain. *'We offered him a lot, but he wasn't ready to agree to our terms.'*

The Economist of 12th July 2007 described the situation as under:

'When last-ditch negotiations broke down in the early hours of 10th July 2007 [at 3 AM], about 200 army commandos stormed the compound. A battle like situation was seen by the alert media because the resistance was fierce. The compound, far from being a madrassa (religious school) housing harmless women and children, was a bunker for well-armed extremists. Some were from banned religious parties and groups, and some linked to al-Qaeda and the 'Taliban' militias terrorising the tribal belt between Pakistan and Afghanistan.'

When negotiations failed, '**Operation Silence**' was launched. Here are the eye-witnessed accounts!

With the restricted access to local hospitals, the government's refusal to release an updated official death toll added to fears that the actual number of fatalities could still be much higher than 68 as official figure which was estimated by the media as 102 after some days. The local city admin maintained that there had been just one group of around 30 women and children inside the compound, led by Umme Hassan, the wife of Maulana Abdul Aziz [who was captured by the forces trying to flee the mosque under a *burka* (veiled dress) a week earlier]. They were housed in one room when the Special Forces attacked and they were allowed to leave the compound alive.

During encounter with the armed forces, Commandos killed Abdul Aziz's brother and the mosque leader Ghazi Abdul Rashid, at the climax of what became a blistering battle for control of the complex in central Islamabad. Mr Ghazi, a university-educated cleric who tried to enforce *Sharia* Rule on Islamabad, was shot twice as the Commandos stormed his basement hideout. On refusing to answer calls to surrender, a second volley of bullets killed him.

The operation to storm the mosque began in darkness at 4am, minutes after last efforts for a peaceful end to the siege by 12,000 policemen and army soldiers had collapsed. The Special Services Group (SSG) had led the attack, striking from three sides. The elite forces immediately came under a hail of fire from heavily armed militants bunkered behind sandbagged positions on the roof and firing through loopholes in the walls. The military commanders had thought the 'Operation Silence' would be over within four hours; wrong calculation it was. The explosions and thunderous gunfire and bullet echoes continued to simmer through the whole day continuously.

Ghazi Abdul Rashid was holed up in one of the mosque's basements, surrounded by girls & children from the women's school serving him as a last-ditch propaganda campaign. Ghazi had told media reporters that he was prepared to be a *Shaheed* (martyr), though only few perceived him as such.

A group of hard-core girl students took up positions inside *Jamia Hafsa*, an extension in the mosque compound. Some were armed with guns and rockets; several areas were 'booby-trapped' like professional fighters. Fleets of ambulances continued to ferry the dead and wounded to hospitals not very far off. Moments after the assault started, Maulana Ghazi had called a local TV network accusing military troops and saying that *'the government is using full force. This is naked aggression; my martyrdom is sure now.'*

For more than 13 hours, the sound of fierce fighting had rattled the capital. The militants were responding with RPGs (rocket launchers), machine gun fire and petrol bombs. The religious education complex, which included a women's academy [*Jamia Hafsa*], was trapped with landmines, and militants were shooting from the minarets. Eight soldiers had died as well.

[It was the Jamia Hafsa which the British schoolgirl Misbah Rana, also known as Molly Campbell, was reported to have been interested in joining after arriving in Pakistan at the centre of an international custody row.]

Pakistan's Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, declared the Red Mosque siege over saying that:

'The government forces had regained full control of the compound after a 36-hour assault. The operation is over. Everybody who was inside is out, but the security forces were still surprised by the ferocity of the resistance. These were trained, hard-core militants, a number of foreigners; Uzbeks, Chechens, Tajiks and Afghans, had been arrested and were undergoing interrogation. We have not found any [dead] body of a woman or child yet.'

Ghazi Abdul Rashid was hoping that an Islamist revolution would be sparked at his death but nothing happened. Instead the people got the enlightenment to ponder that what kind of Islam was being taught here in Red Mosque where the guns, mortars and grenades were also given in the hands of students. Under what provisions of Islam and under what state laws the two Maulana brothers were authorised to Islamize the capital city of Islamabad by use of

armed force. Who had supplied them these arms and from where had they procured so much ammunition.

The state had to enforce its writ where it was being so criminally flouted. For western observers, religious extremism was a curse which had laid Pakistan low amongst nations and must be eliminated. But there were as many who insisted that the militants should have been pardoned and Muslim lives saved. Naturally, this school of thought & camp included clerics and conservatives. There were, however, signs of anger from militants around the country. The opposition coalition of Islamic parties, *Mutahida Majlis e Amal* (MMA), had announced three days of mourning starting from 11th July in NWFP.

Some critics, however, suggest that the fabrics of the Red Mosque students had served as a convenient distraction from Gen Musharraf's dipping popularity. One Brig (rtd) Shaukat Qadir opined that:

'My impression is that if it was not in collusion, the government was at least encouraging this event. The judicial crisis [Gen Musharraf vs Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry] had grown to enormous proportions, and the General wanted to re-establish that fact that he was essential to country; but somewhere along the way things got out of hand.'

BACKGROUND OF LAL MASJID:

The Red Mosque was built in 1965 in the capital city of Islamabad and was named for its red outer walls and red carpets inside. Red Mosque is one of the oldest Mosques in Islamabad and one Maulana Abdullah was appointed its first imam. Abdullah was critical of all governments except Gen Ziaul Haq with whom he was very close. During the Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979–1989), the Red Mosque played a major role in recruiting and training *mujahideen* to fight in Afghanistan. Throughout its existence, it has enjoyed patronage from influential members of the government, prime ministers, army chiefs, and presidents. Several thousand male and female students live in adjacent seminaries.

After Abdullah was assassinated in 1998, his sons Abdul Aziz and Abdul Rashid Ghazi took over the mosque, making it a centre for hard-line teaching and open opposition to the government. Abdul Aziz remained the official *Khatib* of the mosque until he was removed in 2005 for issuing a controversial fatwa stating no Pakistani Army officer could be given an Islamic burial if died fighting the Taliban.

Original Red Mosque was built on a small piece of land. With the passage of time, the mosque managers encroached upon the surrounding area and a big complex like a fort was constructed. Due to influence and strong connections, the Capital Development Authority (CDA) remained unable to get the encroached land vacated till end 2006. In early 2007, CDA strongly persuaded the encroachment matter and issued a vacation notice to the premises managers.

Maulana Abdul Aziz and Ghazi Rashid retaliated the move by taking possession of the nearby Children Library, a CDA owned campus, by using the female student force. These students were motivated in the name of religion and thus the visible conflict started. All this was to force the government to come to some compromise, to the Maulana's terms.

Maulana Ghazi wanted to become hero of the Islamist rebellion in the garb of defying Gen Musharraf's rule in an attempt to install *Sharia* law in the city. Six months ago they placed themselves and the 8,000 students who attended their seminaries in Islamabad on a collision course with the government by launching an anti-vice campaign in the city. A week after clashes broke out between armed students and the military, resulting in more than 20 deaths. Gen Musharraf initially sought to negotiate but then had to send the militants an ultimatum to surrender or die. Mr Ghazi chose the later path.

The campaign began in January 2007 when they occupied the Children's Library near their Red Mosque, referred above, to include it in their Islamic *Jamia* Campus. Negotiations to get

it vacated continued for weeks raising an impression that government had gone scared. In the next step hundreds of *burka-clad* women and stick-wielding girl students at the '*madrasah*' (Jamia Hafsa) took to the streets, kidnapping prostitutes, intimidating movie store owners and down-grading the western diplomat's wives for 'spreading nudity' by wearing sleeveless shirts.

Abdul Rashid Ghazi's girl students, known as '*Danda Bardar Force*' (heavy wooden sticks carrying force), had once abducted seven Chinese nationals working in a local massage parlour, which deeply embarrassed Gen Musharraf before a key ally country China. In fact that was the day 'Operation Silence' was thought and planned. The crisis had sparked deep international concern also.

The ***Guardian of 11th July 2007*** had quoted the EU Foreign Policy Chief Javier Solana saying that:

'He was gravely concerned that fighting could spill over into neighbouring Afghanistan. After the killing of three Chinese nationals in Peshawar a day before, Beijing publicly urged Pakistan to protect its citizens.'

In the context of this military operation, one conflicting voice was of Benazir Bhutto from London. She supported the storming of the mosque as necessarily a strong message to extremists; but she qualified her endorsement by arguing that religious extremism was a consequence of army rule, and only civilian democracy could counter it effectively. However, the subsequent rule of the PPP for more than four years, under the iron hand of her husband Mr Zardari, proved she was wrong.

Liberals and NGOs were anyway opposed to the military rule of Gen Musharraf, and human rights activists did not approve the 'brutish' army operation but without suggesting any alternate remedy to that open lawlessness. At the same moment they hoped that the said operation would make the army realise that:

'It is time to end its alliance with religious forces. Even the army must see the dangers the jihadists pose. They have made desperate attempts to derail the peace process with India; to assassinate Gen Musharraf himself; to Talibanise the frontier regions; and now to enforce their brand of Shariah law in the federal capital by armed blackmail.'

The '***Time***' magazine of 10th July 2007 had, however, opined that:

'The government's cautious handling of the siege has worked in President Pervez Musharraf's favour. Security forces have clearly done their utmost over the past week to protect the lives of civilians, offering negotiations, amnesties, cash and even alternative schooling to students who surrender but all the efforts were continuously & blatantly discarded for eight long days.'

However, alarming incidents in the tribal areas at the hands of Taliban; a possible machine-gun attack on Gen Musharraf's plane while he was ready to fly to the flood-ravaged province of Baluchistan [a day before]; armed tribesmen blocking the Karakoram Highway near the northern border with China; in Multan, hundreds of religious students blocking roads with burning tyres and chanting '*Down With Musharraf*'; clerics at several radical mosques denouncing what they felt as law enforcement agencies attacking fellow Muslims; the banned militant group *Tehrik Nifaz e Shariat e Mohammadi* (TSNM) using FM radio stations in Swat and instructing its followers to carry out jihad against the government and many more such news had an accumulating effect on the military government demanding stern action against the miscreants using the religious platforms as their shields.

Moreover, when Gen Musharraf had announced his support for America's 'war on terror (WOT)', Red Mosque had become the centre of calls for his assassination. One of such speeches was delivered by Maulana Masood Azhar, whose *Jaish e Mohammad* (JeM) fundamentalist group members were later involved in several failed attempts on the life of Gen

Musharraf. *In an interview, Ghazi Rashid had said that they had the support of the Waziristan Taliban and any action against the mosque would generate an 'appropriate response'.*

Once in July 2005, Pakistani security forces had tried to raid the mosque following suicide bombings during 7/7 episode in London. The security personnel were met by baton-wielding women, who refused to let them enter the mosque or seminary compound. Authorities said the security forces were investigating a link between the seminary and one Shehzad Tanweer, one of the 7th July bombers.

'OPERATION SILENCE RESUMED:

Coming back to the details of Operation Silence; as the negotiations were not progressing, it was clear that military action was not far away. While it was still dark, a barrage of explosions was followed by sustained gunfire as commandos moved into the sealed-off complex. The security forces had conducted the operation cautiously because of concerns about killing the women and children still inside. More than 70 separate rooms inside the mosque complex were bolted from inside when the forces were around in the premises.

Supported by paramilitary units, the commandos first seized the mosque itself. While they were freeing about 20 children inside the building, they came under fire from militants positioning in the minarets. The troops next moved against gunmen on the roof of the adjoining school building. Those 20 children were ultimately rescued from the mosque. Twenty-six women were rescued by troops including wife of Maulana Aziz.

About 70 militants were captured or surrendered. Federal Minister for Religious Affairs Ejazul Haq, one of the negotiators, told that women and children had been locked up on two floors of the *Jamia Hafsa* religious school by five 'hardcore terrorists' at least. He also told that one person killed on the first day of the siege belonged to *Jaish e Mohammad* (JeM), an outlawed radical Muslim group linked with al-Qaeda.

Those were days when the tension continued in the capital and security was stepped up at targets considered vulnerable to retaliation, as there were series of reports of periodic gunfire coming from the mosque as militants mounted a final defence in the basement of the complex's residential area; military was bound to move into the final phase of the operation at last.

The daily '***Independent***' of UK ***dated 11th July 2007*** cited about an interview of Ghazi Rashid with their correspondent saying that:

'Mr Ghazi led the way into his office, passing an area of the Lal Masjid in which sat a number of bearded young men with AK-47s. Mr Ghazi, too, had an automatic weapon propped against his desk; in that interview [less than three weeks ago] the erudite said that "The thing is, we are convinced the system in Pakistan is a total failure," he said in excellent English. "It's not giving justice; it's not giving the basic necessities. It's not giving basic education for the people."

'When the interview was over and their guest left, they (the armed students) waved goodbye.'

After 'Operation Silence' the mosque was taken through repair and renovation with its colour changed from red to off-white, but the enraged mullahs had again painted its outer walls with red '*jihadi*' slogans written on it. Emotional scenes were witnessed as parents and relatives of those who died during *Lal Masjid* operation dug out body parts, bones, blood stained clothes, pages of religious books and torn prayer mats from the debris of demolished *Jamia Hafsa*. They also found damaged books, broken utensils; of course, ***jackets of militants were also scattered around in the debris.***

On the second Friday prayers after operation, the clerics and students again attempted to take control of the Red Mosque and started chanting slogans against Gen Musharraf and in

favour of *Jihad*. They also started painting outer walls of the mosque red and wrote pro-jihad slogans. The exchange of stones that ensued outside the mosque between police and the former seminary students was followed by intense teargas shelling that affected residents in the nearby localities with suffocation.

The government should have cleared the debris of demolished *Jamia Hafsa* before opening the mosque for general public. The scene of the remains of bodies charged the people and they reacted with strong protests. Most of the people living in the nearby government quarters were critical of the government.

[To celebrate the first anniversary of Lal Masjid episode, a suicide attacker killed 16 people during the first week of July 2008; twelve of them police officers, during a protest rally near a market place marking last year's Pakistani government raid. The rest of those killed were civilians; fifty-three people injured, mostly police personnel they were. The police were stationed at the outermost security perimeter, part of a protection cordon set up by the government for that rally of about 12,000 people.]

MUSHARRAF RAN OUT OF OPTIONS:

The Red Mosque raid of July 2007 was intended to rout out Islamic extremists who hoped to establish a Taliban-style rule across the capital but instead, it increased suicide attacks on civilians, police and security forces. It also led to the collapse of a controversial cease-fire between Gen Musharraf's government and tribal leaders in the tribal territories along Pakistan's border with Afghanistan. The 2006 truce was blamed for establishing a safe heaven for Taliban & al Qaeda in Pakistan's frontier regions.

A secret meeting between Gen Musharraf and the exiled opposition leader Benazir Bhutto in UAE in the last week of July 2007 had triggered speculation of a power-sharing deal. Neither side had confirmed the details but supporters said it could offer a peaceful transition to full democracy; critics called it military rule under another name. Time schedule was settled for her come back to Pakistan but Benazir Bhutto perhaps did not stick to the timetable. As a result, Gen Musharraf got angry and thus the planning was made to teach her a lesson through **attack of 18th October 2007** in Karachi.

[When she continued to flout the terms of that secret Dubai agreement of July 2007, she was ultimately eliminated on 27th December 2007 in Rawalpindi; it is widely perceived.]

The gravest threat came from the tribal belt where pro-Taliban militants had declared war on the state. Since 3rd July 2007, the first day of the Red Mosque siege, suicide bombers killed more than 200 people, mostly tribal policemen and soldiers. Al-Qaeda was blamed as usual. The fighting was most intense in Waziristan, a mountainous area along the Afghan border where al-Qaeda was allegedly regrouping. Islamabad had no control there. Pakistani soldiers were largely confined to their bases and when they venture out, they were attacked. The defiance was spreading and the pro-government leaders in the tribal belt were beheaded. A big chaos was there all over the country.

On the other hand, the civilians had shattered Gen Musharraf's impression of authority during the same days, led by an unlikely hero the Chief Justice Iftikhar M Chaudhry whose defiance had prompted protests that swelled into a powerful movement. Black-suited lawyers took to streets across the country, hurling insults at the General. The kindest called him a dog. The lawyers were bolstered by the rickshaw class; ordinary people tired of soaring food prices.

An explosion of private television channels had also revolutionized Pakistani politics. Previously coverage was censored but then lively debates used to appear every hour. Live coverage of riots in Karachi on 12th May 2007, when armed government men or its supporters had killed 43 innocent citizens & leaving more than 150 injured; and an open public meeting in Islamabad the same day with Gen Musharraf fostering a triumphant speech was enough to show him his end.

The civilian revolt reached its climax on 20th July 2007 when, against all expectations, a Supreme Court bench headed by Justice Khalilur Rehman Ramday had thrown out Gen Musharraf's case against the Chief Justice Chaudhry. Never before it happened against a sitting military dictator in Pakistan. Gen Musharraf was down & silent; the US and British policies excusing the military dictatorship went up in smoke.

Gen Musharraf remained under continuing ferocious pressure from the White House because they had given him \$10.65 billion in aid. Soon they frustrated with Gen Musharraf's slippery gimmicks. US Congress had to pass aggressive legislation to link American aid with 'do more' approach. Some key US officials had suggested unilateral strikes on al-Qaeda bases in Waziristan. Lee Hamilton, a member of President George Bush's Homeland Security Advisory Council, went too far to give this idea a practical shape but the Pakistan government got angered and alarmed declaring this strategy as counter productive. Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri told the media loudly that:

'This may be election season in the United States but it should not be at our expense.'

One of the core problems with Gen Musharraf was that he had no say in the financial matters. The Pakistan's military had consumed a large proportion of the GDP: probably more than 50%.

[The CIA then commented that much of the Pakistani military budget was hidden in other ministries: much of the salaries and retirement / health accounts, which would be classified as 'military expenditure' in Western accounting systems was not accounted as such in Pakistan.]

The monstrous military expenditure in Pakistan usually came at the cost of investment in education. This led to *madrassas* taking on educational burden which, as per western research, gave propagation to more extremism. True; that weapons do not provide stability when the people are on the breadline. Anti-American hostility was becoming deeper and bitterer. A general perception in those days had prevailed all over Pakistan that:

'Red Mosque & Waziristan: all being manipulated by America, they've just been playing us since 9/11; paying dollars and turning the Pakistani army into killers of Muslims.'

On the other side, Gen Musharraf wanted a return from his rubber-stamp parliament, the product of a rigged vote in 2002, to elect him as president for another five years term later that year. For this he needed a deal with Ms Bhutto, and had promised to withdraw long-standing corruption charges against her. The US and Britain were behind him, apparently convinced Gen Musharraf was still their best bet but the Supreme Court could easily shoot it down thus it was a high-stakes game for Ms Bhutto.

Benazir Bhutto was in exile since nine years. She was also risking a revolt from supporters who considered Gen Musharraf to be a political poison. This was very demoralising move and could undermine the whole process. The intelligentsia was of the view that Benazir Bhutto had bracketed herself among the opportunists. Her support was likely to dip, and the religious parties were in row to pick the fallen ripe fruit out of this compromise; PML(N)'s Sharif family was the first to avail that opportunity.

Nevertheless, the huge welcome of 18th October 2007 at Karachi Airport and the subsequent massive and un-precedented mob following her suddenly changed the whole wishful thinking of the military ruler and a suicidal attack was manoeuvred on immediate basis which left 157 people dead and 300 injured in Karachi.

Brig Huda, the then OIC of Karachi's ISI chapter, had [once more after 12th May's bloodshed] successfully played his role by subverting Benazir's show into a living graveyard amidst roaring cries, scattered human pieces and pools of blood.

Benazir Bhutto, however, got the message.

After two weeks, a mini martial law in the name of 'Emergency' [of 3rd November 2007] was announced for which it had already been placed on record in July 2007 by the International Crisis Group, that:

'Such emergency would accelerate the slide towards a military-led, failing state status prone to domestic unrest and export of Islamic radicalism domestically, regionally and beyond'.

It was OK for Gen Musharraf because he wanted to avoid the fate of the last military ruler, Gen Ziaul Haq, who was blown in ashes in a mysterious plane crash on 17th August 1988 near Bahawalpur.

The post attack [on Benazir Bhutto dated 18th October 2007] sensation among the general masses all over the country had proved that the former commando, Gen Musharraf was running out of options. A poll by the Washington-based International Republican Institute had announced about Gen Musharraf's popularity at 34% - down 20 points since February 2007. It was evident that if politics would fail, he could impose an emergency.

It was the sharp beginning of the end for Gen Musharraf.

And in fact, a month after the Red Mosque raid, Gen Musharraf did consider imposing a state of emergency in Pakistan citing the growing security threat in the tribal regions but the US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had asked him to refrain from such measure. He eventually imposed the same [emergency] on 3rd November 2007, suspending the constitution and sacking dozens of judges. That move ended up rallying more Pakistanis behind Gen Musharraf's political opponents and helped the PPP win the 8th February 2008 elections.