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Editor-in-Chief: Mir Shakil-ur-Rahman

Caving into the extremists?

PML-Q President Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain's second meeting in the space of less than a week with the administration of Lal Masjid seems to suggest that we may be seeing yet another instance of the federal government caving into extremists. Of course, no one is advocating a commando operation necessarily to end the occupation of the children's library or to apprehend all those who were behind the abduction of three women and two policemen a couple of weeks ago. However, there are several reasons which make one believe that the Lal Masjid fanatics are about to get their way — which will be a terrible shame because it will send the signal to other like-minded obscurantists and vigilantes across the country that taking the law into one's hands certainly pays off in Pakistan. From the various reports that have detailed these meetings, it can be safely believed that the illegality of the actions of the Jamia Hafsa students is not the issue, although the PML-Q chief is said to have asked the Lal Masjid administration to get the children's library vacated. Second, the extremists have been asked, according to one report, to select seven locations in the federal capital where the government will build mosques in exchange for those that the CDA demolished — because they were built on illegally encroached land.

The point that one is trying to make — and one that would be very clear — is that the government should have been negotiating from a position of strength. If, as reports suggest, several ministers and intelligence agencies have ruled out an operation against the fanatics or kept it as a measure of last resort, this should not have meant that the government speak from a position of weakness and accede to all the demands of the clerics. For starters, building a house of worship on an encroached or illegal land is violative of both temporal as well as religious law, so the government should not have felt compelled to fulfil this particular demand of the Lal Masjid and Jamia Hafsa fanatics. Secondly, those students who reportedly told the PML-Q that they respected the law and would never do anything against it are being mendacious because their illegal actions were watched and documented in detail for the rest of the country.

As for those advocating a soft approach to resolving this crisis, the argument being given is that launching an operation could lead to casualties and create a law and order problem in the federal capital. One would like to ask these illustrious government functionaries what the police and the Islamabad administration were doing when the Jamia Hafsa and Lal Masjid students went on their 'raids' in one of Islamabad's main markets and when these fanatics abducted three women (and a baby) and two policemen? Had not a law and order situation developed then, with the capital of the country in the grip of lathi-wielding extremists, who held the women and the baby for over two days, not releasing them before one of them was forced to 'confess' on national television the sins which she may or may not be guilty of.

Also, one would like to ask the PML-Q chief whether he has raised the issue with the Lal Masjid clerics on the setting up of a parallel court, which may amount to high treason if clause I of Article 6 is read carefully ("Any person who abrogates or attempts or conspires to abrogate, subverts or attempts or conspires to subvert the Constitution by use of force or show of force or by other unconstitutional means shall be guilty of high treason"). It is quite incredible that the government has taken the view that those responsible for keeping Islamabad hostage for so many weeks should not be proceeded against under the law for their wholly illegal and vigilante actions and is instead planning to meet all their demands. It also seems inconceivable that an entity no less than the government of Pakistan is unable to establish its writ and negotiate from a position of strength against a bunch of self-styled guardians of morality and vigilantes. One can only hope that better sense prevails and this caving in does not materialise. If it does — and the indications all seem to be that it will — it will be quite a contradiction and difficult for the government to defend given its repeated calls to Pakistanis in general to fight and resist extremism. It's time the government practiced what it preaches.