Pakistan’s crackdown on ‘Red Mosque’ extremism

ISLAMABAD: Despite public humiliation and periods of house arrest, the former leader of Pakistan’s notorious Red Mosque is inspiring a new generation of extremists with his old rhetoric—high-flown promises, fiery preaching—apparently without fear of repercussions.

Aziz calls for caliphate to be established in Pakistan

During his time at the helm of the Red Mosque, Aziz shot to prominence for his inflammatory sermons, advocating jihad against the West and a hard-line interpretation of Islam. He spread this message among his thousands of students, mostly poor children from rural areas who are educated for free at madrassas affiliated with the mosque, sparking accusations of brainwashing from critics. By 2007 things had reached a tipping point.

His armed followers had begun taking his message to the streets of the capital, vandalising CD and DVD stalls and kidnaping Chinese massagees, with tensions quickly degenerating into murderous clashes. When the regime of then-President Pervez Musharraf launched an assault on the mosque on July 10, 2007, the army found itself facing heavily armed jihadists. The controversial operation was followed minute-by-minute on live television, with more than 100 people killed in the week-long effort to pacify the mosque and arrest its leaders.

The attack on the religious site sparked ferocious blowback from extremists across the country, marking the emergence of the Pakistani Taliban (TTP)—an umbrella organization for homegrown militant groups targeting the Pakistani state. In the following years Islamist violence increased dramatically, with thousands of Pakistanis killed, maimed, or forced to flee their homes as security deteriorated. Aziz himself was arrested as he tried to flee the besieged mosque in a burqa, taken straight to a television studio and paraded in the garment—earning the nickname “Mullah Burqa”.

Women convicted of raping colleague

Aziz remains influential, overseeing a network of seminaries as he calls for a “caliphate” to be established in Pakistan. However, the government has chosen not to file appeals, said lawyer Sadeeq— who happens to be Aziz’s nephew.

Never convicted

He faced two dozen indictments, including incitement to hatred, murder and kidnapping. But Aziz was released on bail in 2009. “He was acquitted in all these cases, and the government has chosen not to file appeals,” said lawyer and civil rights activist Jibran Nasir.

“Many of their community leaders are spreading false information that the card wouldn’t work without ‘Rohingya’. ‘Rohingya’ is our identity. Why is it not mentioned in our cards?” he asked. One Bangladeshi official said the government’s decision not to include the refugees’ ethnicity was in line with international norms.

“Aziz is tolerated... because it would be like touching a hornet’s nest,” said former general Talat Masood.

Kicking the ‘hornet’s nest’

“Aziz is tolerated... because it would be like touching a hornet’s nest,” explains former general Talat Masood. Given the sensitivity of the population to religious questions, intervening “would risk attracting sympathies”, authorities, however, appear to be keeping him on a tight leash for now.

Aziz is no longer welcome at the Red Mosque, which theoretically belongs to the state, and he has been placed on the Pakistan’s anti-terrorist list.

A rally planned by his supporters to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Red Mosque siege was banned by the courts. In recent months, the authorities have blocked roads surrounding the mosque to prevent Aziz from holding rallies and have taken measures to stop him from preaching on Friday, even remotely by phone. The Red Mosque’s new imam Maulana Aamir Sadeeq, an affable 30-year-old, said it was time to “forget the past” and “the extreme positions” of a decade ago. “We must put a distance between terrorism and us,” said Sadeeq—who happens to be Aziz’s nephew.

BANGLADESH: A Rohingya Muslim refugee carries branches through Kutupalong refugee camp in the Bangladeshi district of Ukhiya.—AFP

RACE ROW HAMPER ROHINGYA REGISTRATION IN BANGLADESH

Cox’s Bazar: Many of the half a million Rohingya refugees newly arrived in Bangladesh are refusing to be registered because their ethnicity is not included in the document, slowing a process seen as key to their eventual return to Myanmar. The Bangladesh military began registering the estimated 480,000 new arrivals more than two weeks ago, but has so far only completed the process for around 24,000. Yesterday the coordinator for the registration centers said refugees were objecting to the language on the form, which refers to them simply as Myanmar nationals.

“According to our information, they want to have the name ‘Rohingya’ in their cards beside their citizenship status,” Major Kajib Kabir said. “The government decision is to term them as only Myanmar citizens.”

Registering the Rohingyas is seen as key to their eventual return to Myanmar, whose de-facto civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi has said the country would take back verified refugees. Aid agencies say it is also crucial to ensure that supplies are distributed evenly.

The United Nations estimates around 480,000 Rohingyas have crossed into Bangladesh since August 25 after fleeing violence in Myanmar’s Rakhine state. There were already at least 300,000 Rohingyas living there after fleeing previous bouts of violence in Myanmar, which regards them as illegal immigrants even though they have lived there for many generations. Bangladesh recognizes only a tiny proportion of the Rohingyas as refugees, referring to the majority as undocumented Myanmar nationals.

Nur Hakim, who received his registration card yesterday, said he was “not happy” that the card given to him at the registration centre did not carry the name “Rohingya”.

“Many of their community leaders are spreading false information that the card wouldn’t work without ‘proper identification,’” he said, speaking on condition of anonymity.—AFP

INDIAN COURT CHARGES EX-EDITOR WITH RAPE COLLEAGUE

Mumbai: An Indian court yesterday charged the former editor of a renowned news magazine with raping a female colleague four years ago, the prosecutor said. Tarun Tejpal pleaded not guilty to charges of rape, sexual harassment and wrongful restraint, the public prosecutor Francisco Taviera told reporters outside the court in the western state of Goa. “The charges have been framed against Tarun Tejpal and he has pleaded not guilty to rape charges,” said Taviera.

Tejpal, the 54-year-old founder and former editor of Tehelka magazine, was accused of raping a female journalist in the lift of a five-star hotel in Goa in November 2013. He was granted bail in 2014. The case hit the headlines at a time when sexual assault on women had begun taking place as security deteriorated. Aziz was released under the spotlight following the fatal gang-rape of a student in New Delhi in December 2012 that sparked widespread protests and resulted in the strengthening of anti-rape laws.

Tehelka magazine had reported forcefully on gender inequality in India, highlighting police and judicial insensitivity to rape victims as well as the misogynistic attitudes of many Indian men. The woman, who has since quit the magazine, cannot be named for legal reasons. The trial in the long-delayed case will start on November 21, the Press Trust of India news agency reported. Tejpal has consistently denied the allegations and has suggested that the ruling right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party was orchestrating the case to punish him for his magazine’s critical coverage.—AFP