Surrender again?

BY OW E N B E N N E T T-J O N E S | 3/3/2020

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| THE news that the Aabpara police have charged 10 men for brandishing Kalashnikovs in or around the Lal Masjid suggests that, at last, the state might be doing its job. But don`t get too excited while the forces of law and order have registered a case, they still haven`t plucked up the courage to actually arrest the men.But then, ever since 9/11, the role of a section of Deobandi clerics in jihadist violence has been underplayed. Despite being active participants in many arenas of post 9/11 conflict in Pakistan, the Deobandis have been able to operate in the place they like best out of the limelight The Deobandis have many faces.Tableeghi Jamaat runs massive missionary operations. Various iterations of the JUI participate in parliamentary politics. And then there are the militants, mounting attacks in Pakistan and the UK too but largely quiescentin India. And there is a reason for that. The Indian state has taken a firm, consistent line against Deobandi militancy and that pressure has worked. The Deobandi leadership in India has explicitly and repeatedly rejected the use of violence.Last month, Maulana Abdul Aziz asked an important question. Would the Pakistani authorities have the courage to take him on? Back in 2007, as most Pakistanis remember all too well, the maulana turned Lal Masjid into an arsenal and provoked a major confrontation with the state. Whilst his younger brother willingly went to his death, Maulana Aziz took the less dignified approach of fleeingthe sceneinaburqa.In any normal country, a man who had a leading role in such a shocking and disastrous event could reasonably expect to spend the rest of his life behind bars. But despite never resiling from his support for all forms of Deobandi violence up to and including suicide bombings and the Army Public School attack, Aziz was free to roam around. And last month, he slipped into the Lal Masjid with some female students and gave some sermons. He was back. How would the state react? It should not have been difficult to answer that. The maulana`s brand of Deobandism has less support than it did a decade ago. And when he asked other Deobandi madressahs in Islamabad to send students to support him, not many answered the call. Maulana Aziz`s isolation could be explained by fellow Deobandi clerics being sick of his publicity-seeking ways or because of deeper ideological objections.Either way the maulana, and the Deobandis as a whole, are far weaker than a decade ago. In f act, the only unifying rallying point for the Deobandi movement now is resistance to curriculum reform.The differences between different Deobandis provide favourable circumstances for the Pakistani state to get a grip.Disappointingly, the authorities chose not to f ace down the maulana, but instead decided to appease him. The interior ministry entered into talks with a delegation of clerics and an officer of the capital administration told this paper that the authorities were willing to negotiate with Maulana Aziz so as to resolve the issue peacefully.Maulana Aziz has repeatedly and outrageously demanded compensation, for the destruction of Jamia Hafsa, setting in train a long-running dispute about the location and size of an alternative plot for a new women`s madressah. But that is in fact a sideshow. The real point, as the maulana himself said, is that when he gives a sermon in a small mosque in G-7 nobody cares but when he speaks from the L al Masjid, everyone listens. The maulana`s goal is clear he wants to run Lal Masjid once again with some money and building plots thrown in.The questions most Pakistanis are asking is: `why is that man still bothering us?` The question the state is asking is, `how can the maulana be persuaded to leave the Lal Masjid without a big drama?` Rather than telling him that insurgents don`t get compensation, the state has been offering a parcel of land inIslamabad to build a replacement Jamia Haf sa. Or perhaps a larger parcel of in Fateh Jhang, near the new airport. Which would the maulana prefer? Sensing the state`s weakness, the maulana has rejected these offers and demanded more.No doubt the land may never be delivered.Pakistani bureaucrats after all are the masters of not implementing policy and as the maulana probably realises, he now faces years of being told: `Is that what my predecessor promised? Really? Give me some time to look into it and I`ll get back to you.Even so, the very offer of a deal sends a signal: those who violently defy the state can demand a reward. Normal countries don`t do that to people who offer armed resistance. They hand down exemplary jail sentences and get on with the real task of government providing the people with jobs, food, shelter and medical care. The writer is a British journalist. His book The Bhutto Dynasty will be published later this year.  |