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## Vigilante justice

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

Last month the ladies of Jamia Hafsa went on vigilante rampage. They raided an alleged brothel, took three women and a suspicious six-month-old baby hostage, and held press conferences announcing the end of illicit activities in Islamabad. When the police tried to intercede, the brothers from Lal Masjid took two officers captive. Eventually the Jamia Hafsa protectors of justice released the women and the baby and settled down for some really important business. No, not the burning of offensive and immoral DVDs -- such as 'Home Alone 4' and 'Free Willy', which they probably didn't realise was a children's film about a whale -- or the harassing of government officials for engaging in un-Islamic paragliding etiquette, but together with Maulana Abdul Aziz, patron of Lal Masjid, they have buckled down and set upon a course of righteousness and Taliban style action.

Maulana Abdul Aziz is nothing if not a pious man. He generously offered to marry prostitutes willing to turn their back on a life of harlotry. Women of the night all across Pakistan must have breathed a loud sigh of relief. But that is not the full extent of the Maulana's commitment to morality and rectitude. Last week at the Shariat and Glory of Jihad Conference held in Islamabad, Maulana Abdul Aziz announced the creation of a Shariat court to be headed by ten qazis and modelled on the Taliban system of merciful Islamic justice. The court would implement the Shariat, which -- let's be brutally honest -- just isn't being adequately enforced in our quaint Islamic Republic, and crack down on un-Islamic activities the country over. Those found dabbling in naughty and unscrupulous behaviour would be notified via post to cease and desist, explained the Maulana. Should they refuse to "mend their ways" a case would be registered against the perpetrators in the upright Shariat court and the appropriate action taken against them. Maintaining the nobility of his platform, as is necessary of a devout religious leader, Maulana Aziz warned that if the state tried to interfere they would face a flurry of suicide bombings. "We have guns," he ominously added this past Thursday, just in case we hadn't gotten the message the first time around.

The chicks with sticks as they are now affectionately referred to and their Lal Masjid compatriots are not the first citizens of the world to want to take community justice into their own hands. They are not the first to feel that the established means of law and order do not meet the needs of the people nor are they the first to beg participation and agency in the often exclusive sphere of legal matters. But they're certainly doing it the wrong way.

After 80,000 to 100,000 people were killed in one hundred days of ethnic bloodletting in Rwanda, the Central African Republic embarked upon a path of healing. The courts were

clogged and justice was moving at a snails pace with 130,000 suspects held in prison, so inspired by traditional mediation forums the Gacaca courts were set up. The Gacaca courts, meaning the small patch of land where village elders gathered to settle disputes or literally 'justice on the grass', were not headed by conventional judges but by locals known for their integrity called Inyangamugayo or the uncorrupted. The mission was simple: the promotion of community justice, the acceleration of legal proceedings, and the "reconciliation of all Rwandans" and building of national unity. Those brought to trial at the Gacaca courts did not need lawyers, and community members were invited to participate either in favour of or against the defendants who came to ask forgiveness for their crimes.

That is community justice.

In post apartheid South Africa the leaders of the ANC and the revered Reverend Desmond Tutu sought not revenge nor retribution, but truth and reconciliation. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up in 1995 and opened its doors to anyone who felt that they had been a victim of apartheid's violence. There was no "victor's justice" -- no one was exempt from being called to appear before the commission. Even F W de Klerk, the former president was summoned and took the stand, apologising for the suffering inflicted by apartheid. Out of 7,112 petitioners 849 were granted amnesty for their crimes while 5,392 were not. The commission, like the Gacaca courts, was upheld not only by local community leaders, but also by the state. Nelson Mandela, whose own wife admitted wrongdoing before the bench gave his support to the Truth and Reconciliation commission and heralded it as "an unforgettable occasion for all South Africans". It is the realisation of their hopes and dreams that we have cherished for decades. We are starting a new era of hope, of reconciliation, of nation building".

That is community justice.

From the 1980s to the late 1990s Peru was paralysed by a radical civil war. Rebel groups, such as The Shining Path, and the Peruvian military engaged in acts of mass disappearances, torture, and murder. The violence that destabilised the Latin American country left 69,280 people dead and thousands of children orphaned. In 2001 the Comision de la Verdad y Reconciliacion was inaugurated to hear the atrocities faced by the Peruvian people. The Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission brought together members of civil society including journalists, activists, priests, and artists to collect testimonies and compile a report detailing the historic violence that had plagued their country.

Two years after the committee wrapped up its hearings an archive of photographic evidence was set up called Yuyanapaq or "For Remembering". Twenty years of human rights abuses and terroristic violence was kept on exhibition so that the Peruvian people would never forget the dead they had sacrificed.

That is community justice.

Maulana Abdul Aziz's Shariat court has nothing to do with community justice. Not in the least. It has to do with intimidation, fascist morality and mob ethics. The women who stalk the city of

Islamabad sheathed in black and armed with bamboo sticks have no vision of community and what it actually embodies: tolerance.