

Saeed disguised as Saeed

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Having been suckered a couple of times by fakery on and around All Fool's Day on April 1, I tend to be extra wary of news items around that date. For instance, I could scarcely believe one report from Argentina that the country's government had imposed a backdoor ban on the import of books.

The Argentines cited "human health concerns" for that ban. Apparently the fear was that readers would get poisoned by toxic levels of lead in the ink. The Cato Institute's blog translated a report in Spanish that quoted an Argentinian publishing industry official explaining: "If you put your finger in your mouth after paging through a book, that can be dangerous."

The censors in India must be smacking their lips in anticipation at the thought of emulating this inventive Argentinian gambit to lick the threat posed by novels like Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*.

But when it comes to bizarre, you can rarely outdo the land that produced the cine classic, *International Gorillay*. It was a film in which jihadis attempt to assassinate Rushdie. The country is Pakistan, where they have plenty of guerrillas but spelling, among many other issues, remains problematic. Over the past week, it's been difficult to distinguish reality in news reports from there from surreality.

First, of course, there was the busting of the myth of Osama the Caveman. While American experts had been speculating since the autumn of 2001 about how stalactite formations in the cave inhabited by the al-Qaeda supremo might have caused his kidney disease, it was revealed that he hadn't caved in to the rigours of life on the run, and had, in fact, lived comfortably in various well-appointed residences throughout Pakistan since 2002.

Of course, we did know that his last known address was in Abbottabad, a fortified cantonment area of Pakistan, but his Yemeni fifth wife, Amal Ahmed al-Sadah listed various other desirable locations where Bin Laden and his entourage had lived in that country. Also, that he had fathered four children during that period, which probably explains why his personal courier was regularly expected to deliver consignments of herbal Viagra.

The ISI, apparently, wasn't aware of his cross-country travels, accompanied by three wives and at least four children. That may be because he never officially applied for a tourist visa

for a leisurely journey through Pakistan's scenic spots. That's made them livid now and a Pakistani court has jailed his three wives, for all of a fortnight, for the ghastly crime of not holding a valid visa.

We also know now that Bin Laden wanted to rebrand al Qaeda, believing that the terror outfit had lost its chicness. He could have consulted Pakistan's resident nawab of relaunching terrorists, Lashkar-e-Taiba chief Hafiz Mohammed Saeed, with whom he had frequent couriered contact.

LeT mutated to the Jamaat-ud-Dawa to Difa-e-Pakistan, perhaps even Kim-e-Kar-dashian, though that cannot be confirmed at this time. Saeed has just been listed under the US Rewards for Justice programme, with a \$10 million bounty.

After the announcement, Saeed appeared so frequently among the talking heads on Pakistani news television that he probably made Suhel Seth envious. In fact, in interviews after the US reward was announced, Saeed ridiculed it: "We are not hiding in caves for bounties to be set on finding us." That makes sense since when he's not appearing on Pakistani Idol, he's out there leading protests against India, America and Israel in various Pakistani cities, like Lahore, where he lives, Islamabad or Karachi. Saeed would probably have to wear a gorilla suit and clamber atop Islamabad's tallest building to be less visible. Or move to Abbottabad. Probably not even then.

The US says that the pelf is tied to proof leading to Saeed's arrest, hoping a greedy ISI handler will oblige. Will that be enough for the Lahore court that freed Saeed? Probably not. So the game of daft charades will continue.

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The views expressed by the author are personal