Pakistan: new attacks on democratic rights by Sharif's regime

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The Nawaz Sharif government of Pakistan is continuing its attacks on the democratic rights of the masses.

In the first week of May, police and the intelligence agencies of the security forces took two newspaper editors and one journalist into custody. The editor of a weekly magazine *Friday Times*, Najam Sethi, was arrested on May 6. His wife, Jugnu Molisin, also a journalist, was allowed to see him only when a mass agitation built up against the arrests and the Supreme Court allowed a *habeas corpus* application on his behalf.

Also arrested was the editor-in-chief of *Frontier Post*, Rehman Shah Afridi, and journalist M. A. K. Lodhi.

Sethi has been accused of having connections with RAW (Research and Analysis Wing—the Indian Intelligence Agency) and was arrested by ISI (Pakistani Inter-services Intelligence). He was arrested after the Pakistan High Commissioner complained to the government that a speech he gave in India was derogatory to Pakistan. Now he is in solitary confinement and human rights groups express fears that he might he tried in a military court.

On May 14, about 200 journalists staged a protest march near the governor's house against the arrest of Sethi, Afridi and Lodhi. The Pakistan Federation of Journalists and human rights groups in the country termed the arrests as “an attempt to chain the press”. Last February, more than 3,000 journalists marched in Karachi opposing a tax case against the Jang newspaper group, charging it was a move to “muzzle the press”.

As another measure to silence criticisms of the government, on May 9, on the instructions of the federal government, Punjab Provincial State dissolved 1,941 non-governmental organizations (NGOs). They were alleged to be “involved in corrupt practices and undesirable activities.” Bank accounts of these NGOs were frozen and assets confiscated. The government also threatened other organizations, including the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. This repression was condemned by the press “as a move to crush any voice of opposition”.

Last December the Sharif government installed military courts in Karachi in the name of “fighting crime”. The Supreme Court decreed that the establishment of military courts was unconstitutional and instructed the government to transfer cases to the special anti-terrorist courts, which conduct summary trials and render quick verdicts.

The re-arrest of a 13-year-old boy by the police to re-open a murder case reveals the heinous nature of these anti-terrorist courts. The boy, Mohammed Salim, was previously arrested by the police along with three others who were accused of murdering a policeman. The accused were sentenced to death.

The boy was released after a petition campaign by human right groups to the military appeals court. Now an anti-terrorist court has reopened his case and there is renewed agitation to secure his release. This boy was from a very poor Bengali-speaking family. He worked along with his three brothers as a child laborer in a carpet factory in order to support his fisherman father's income. In Karachi and other cities tens of thousands of children like Salim have become victims of dire poverty.

Poverty is on the increase in Pakistan. A report by the Asian Development Bank, *Asian Development Outlook—1999*, states: “The poverty profile (in Pakistan) has worsened in recent years. The number of people living below the poverty line grew from 25.2 percent in 1990 to 34.0 percent in 1994. In addition rural and urban coefficients for the 1990s show the

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distribution of income has been worsening. Similarly, urban and rural wage rates have also decreased. An increasingly vulnerable group consists of those who are educated, but unemployed. Unemployment of educated workers has risen because of the combined effects of the liberalization of the economy under structural adjustment programs, the privatization of public enterprises, and the recession that has affected the private sector...”

This is an acknowledgment that the IMF's policies have worsened poverty in Pakistan. The sanctions imposed by the G-7 countries after the nuclear tests in June 1998 aggravated the situation and Pakistan was thrown to the brink of default. Pakistan's external debt is estimated to be US$31 billion, equivalent to about half of its GDP. Per capita income in 1998 was US$490.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, addressing a meeting on May 1, announced the cancellation of the May Day holiday as a part of a plan to cut down workers' holidays, in line with the IMF conditions. He said the move was intended to establish a “work culture” and “increase productivity” as required for the country's economic growth.

The Sharif government's attack on democratic rights is aimed at the masses, who are simmering with discontent. Last year Sharif tried to impose Islamic Law as the country's Supreme Law in order to suppress the masses. He was unable to muster sufficient support to get it through the Legislative Assembly.

His attempt to gag the main opposition party and its leader, using corruption charges, is also part of his assault on democratic rights. There is no doubt that Benazir Bhutto and her clique in the Pakistan Peoples Party have engaged in corrupt practices. Sharif and his clique are accused of similar charges. The corruption of the ruling cliques is a reflection of the degeneration of capitalist politics to the core.

The Pakistani ruling class has resorted to military rule several times since independence in 1947. It is moving again in that direction.

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