

Pakistani military establishes martial law regime

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16 October 1999

Pakistani military coup leader, General Pervaiz Musharraf, effectively established a martial law regime early Friday morning. He proclaimed a state of emergency, suspended the constitution, terminated the parliament and appointed himself the country's Chief Executive. The declaration was backdated to October 12, the day on which the armed forces seized power in a coup.

General Musharraf's proclamation ended speculation about the short-term plans of the military. Earlier there had been suggestions in Pakistani ruling circles and in Western capitals that the army command might simply hand power to other figures and call an election. Musharraf's declaration did not mention an election.

The junta leader declared office holders and members of elected bodies—from Prime Minister to Provincial Councilors—to have been removed or suspended from their posts. Furthermore, "The National Assembly, the provincial assemblies and Senate shall stand suspended." Under the proclamation, "The whole of Pakistan will come under the control of the Armed Forces of Pakistan".

Pakistan's President will remain in office but "shall act on, and in accordance with, the advice of Chief Executive". All courts "shall continue to function and exercise their respective power" but "shall not have the powers to make any order against the Chief Executive or any person exercising power or jurisdiction under his autonomy". The army will decide "fundamental rights" from time to time. According to Provisional Constitution Order No 1, no court shall make any judgment, decree, writ or process whatsoever against the Chief Executive.

The imposition of emergency rule came after mixed reactions from the US administration and the European powers, as well as support for the coup throughout the

Pakistani political elite.

President Clinton told a press conference on Thursday: "We do not like it when military leaders forcibly displace elected governments." But his statements fell short of condemnation. The next day, after Musharraf's emergency declaration, Clinton ruled out any US effort to restore ousted Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Asked if he was seeking to have Sharif reinstated, Clinton told Reuters the US wanted a restoration of civilian, democratic government but added: "As a matter of principle, the United States, any country, never attempts to select the leaders for any other country. That's their job. The people are supposed to do that, not us." The Reuters correspondent observed that this position contrasted with the US operation to restore former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide after a 1991 coup.

Initially, the Clinton administration did not identify General Musharraf's seizure of power as a "coup". After Friday's proclamation, one senior US Official said that the US now considered it as "a military take over". But the White House sent its Ambassador to Pakistan, William Milam, to meet Musharraf and the military leaders to "hear their intentions". According to Associated Press, Milam told his embassy staff the meeting had been "good".

White House spokesman Joe Lockhart said the US had little leverage over Pakistan because sanctions had already been applied last year over Pakistan's nuclear testing. State Department officials said a \$2.5 million program to counter narcotics would not be interrupted, but a \$1.7 million health program would be suspended.

One of the Clinton administration's main concerns is whether the new rulers in Pakistan will be a barrier to its policies in the South Asia, especially with regard to Afghanistan. It is also aware that Musharraf controls

Pakistan's nuclear weapons and was instrumental in the recent conflict with India over Kashmir. Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said: "From what we know about Musharraf and his government, in the most fundamental respects we expect them to be careful stewards of their weaponry."

The US response seemed to be more muted than that of Britain and other European powers. The 15-nation European Union threatened to impose sanctions and cut aid to Pakistan. British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook said Pakistan faced suspension from the Commonwealth of former British colonies.

Leading figures across the spectrum in Pakistan's political establishment moved to embrace the coup. According to the *Daily Telegraph*, opposition Pakistan People's Party leader Benazir Bhutto said that while she would expect "free and fair elections" she was ready to accept a role in an interim administration if the military adopted a "moderate agenda". Paying tribute to General Musharraf, Bhutto said she "understood" why the military took power.

A senator of the fundamentalist Jamart-I-Islami Party, Khurshid Ahmed told the *Washington Post* that the "entire nation has heaved a sigh of relief. Nobody wants martial law, but we need a transition to a system that works."

International cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan expressed support for military rule and said, "the people are really happy". Khan's attempt to interpret the apparent passivity among masses in Pakistan as approval of the coup is an illusion. The indifference is an indication of the widespread discontent with Sharif's rule, which was shaken by demonstrations against a proposed 15 percent General Sales Tax.

Despite its name, the 19-member Grand Democratic Alliance of parties opposed to Sharif, including Bhutto's PPP, refused to condemn the coup. It postponed making an announcement on Friday, even after hours of meetings. A spokesman, Nawabzada Nasrullah, avoided giving a direct answer on the legitimacy of the army's actions, claiming that more time was needed to assess the military's intentions.

Yet the military's intentions to consolidate its rule were expressed when a senior army official told the *Washington Post* that "there is no question of a return to the former political setup." His remarks suggest that the generals are going to argue that they are "cleaning a

political system that allows corrupt people to decide the destiny of our people." In reality, military rule from 1958 to 1972 and from 1977 to 1988 was ravaged with corruption, in addition to savage repression.

Just after the coup, the military imposed a bank holiday on Wednesday (October 13) and from Thursday the central bank extended the suspension of trading in foreign exchange, fearing a likely flight of hard currency. On Friday, the Karachi stock exchange index plunged 9 percent in the first post-coup day of trading.

Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves—at US\$1.4 billion—are only enough for three weeks' imports. The country's outstanding foreign debt is estimated at US\$32 billion. Military expenditure consumed 27.8 percent of the country's budget in 1997.

The IMF recently delayed a loan tranche of US\$289 million to Pakistan on the ground that the Sharif government had failed to impose the 15 percent sales tax. After the military coup, an IMF spokesman William Murray said the Fund "will be monitoring the situation closely and assessing its implications for Pakistan's economic program and borrowing arrangements with the fund". That means that although the IMF has previously delayed the loan, it will consider transactions with the new regime on the basis of the implementation of IMF conditions.

The reality is that, sooner rather than later, military rule will inevitably turn on the masses with harsh conditions, severely affecting those who are already in a dire situation.



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