

Pakistani political elite supports military regime

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17 November 1999

Former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, speaking to a symposium in Toronto, Canada on November 8, said, “General Musharraf’s intentions look honest when he says that he will be fair in his approach and that he is motivated by patriotism.” Bhutto’s remarks, reported by the Pakistani newspaper *Dawn*, concerned the military chief who took power in a coup overthrowing the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on October 12. Her speech reflected the common approach of the major political parties in Pakistan to the military overthrow.

The coup took place in the midst of growing agitation demanding Sharif’s resignation. The opposition launched its anti-government drive after the withdrawal of Pakistani-backed forces from the Kargil heights in Indian Kashmir last July. Sharif countered with a campaign of repression.

When the military took power in Pakistan, Bhutto, the leader of the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), the main bourgeois opposition party, was in London, where she has been living in exile to avoid a jail sentence on corruption charges. At a press conference in London on October 19 Bhutto acknowledged that she had made contact with the army after the coup, seeking safe passage to return to Pakistan. Justifying the coup, she said that Sharif “created conditions” for the military take over. “He has sought to dismantle democracy...When he attacked the army there was a perception that he was politicizing the last non-political institution in the country. The army reacted,” she said. Bhutto hailed the coup leader, General Musharraf, as “a courageous and bold professional, committed to civilian order.”

Her claim that the military is a “non-political institution” is absurd. The Pakistani military has ruled the country, on and off, for a total of more than two

decades since independence in 1947. Last month’s coup was the third military takeover in the 52-year history of the country. Even under civilian rule the generals have exercised enormous political influence.

The PPP leader offered to work with the military in an “interim council” that she expected Musharraf would set up. But the military instead indicated it would charge Bhutto for corruption as part of its effort to “cleanse society”.

Despite this, in an interview with the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, Bhutto reiterated that she was “ready to offer any kind of informal help (to the military) ... in the interest of the country.” Having received the signal from the party leader in London, PPP leaders within Pakistan proceeded to bow to the new military regime. The *Dawn* newspaper reported that PPP former minister and senator Iqbal Haider praised the military leader, saying he “sounded more like a sincere, well-meaning, humble and committed patriot.”

Among the vociferous supporters of the coup was the politician-turned cricket captain Imran Khan. He was quoted in the October 18 issue of *Dawn* as saying: “In view of this serious situation the entire nation and all democratic parties have welcomed the dismissal of the Nawaz government and takeover by the army.”

The Muttihida Qaumi Movement (MQM), based on Indian Muslims who fled to Pakistan during the partition of 1947, took the same stand. When the general announced he would carry out IMF dictates, MQM said: “It is a popular agenda.” In a November 1 open letter to the military chief, MQM “recognized that the General had taken upon himself the task of national reconstruction, security and reorganization.”

Leaders of the nineteen-party Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA), which was formed three months back

to escalate agitation to oust Nawaz Sharif, welcomed Musharraf's October 17 policy declaration. The military chief's "program is in complete harmony with our agenda and we support it," said the GDA in a statement issued after its leaders met on October 21. The GDA includes the PPP, MQM and other political parties. It excludes Jamaat-I-Islami and other fundamentalist groups.

Immediately after the coup, Jamaat Vice President Prof. Gaffoor Ahmed said: "The whole nation has supported the army takeover and hopes he (Musharraf) will not unnecessarily prolong his rule." But in recent days a conflict has arisen between the Jamaat-I-Islami and the military ruler. In an interview given to Turkish TV, Musharraf said he admired the Turkish nationalist and secularist leader Kemal Ataturk, who ruled Turkey in 1920s, and would like to direct Pakistan in line with Kemal's program. In response to this statement, Jamaat leader Qazi Hussein Ahmed declared there was no room for a secular government in Pakistan, whereupon the army banned him from entering his home province, the North West Frontier Province, for 30 days. Jamaat said it would go to the courts against this ban.

In the aftermath of the coup divisions have emerged within Nawaz Sharif's Pakistani Muslim League (PML). Sharif is in so-called protective custody and the military dictator has hinted that the ousted prime minister could be tried for "treason and corruption." PML Vice President Ijazul Haq told the press in London on October 16 that he was ready to become a caretaker prime minister in any civilian administration. He denounced "sycophants who surrounded Sharif and fed him bad advice." After a meeting of party leaders on October 21, Zafarul Haq, a party coordinator, said the meeting had decided not to adopt a policy of "confrontation" (with the military).

Economic collapse and bitter rivalries among various factions have plagued the ruling elite. Sharif had to withhold implementation of some of the IMF conditions out of fear of a social explosion. Visiting Washington last August, Shahbaz Sharif, then chief minister of Punjab Province and brother of the prime minister, said, "Over 90 percent of the people in Pakistan live in abject poverty. They are deprived of the most basic amenities of life, while less than 5 percent live in a state of obscene luxury."

The 1997 general election provided an indication of

the gulf between the political elite and the masses, and the people's contempt for the existing parties. It was widely reported that Sharif's party received 65 percent of the votes, but voter turnout was a mere 26 percent.

The *Financial Times* wrote on November 2: "Popular disgust with Mr. Sharif is only marginally greater than loathing for Ms. Bhutto... 'The people of Pakistan hate Nawaz Sharif but they hate Benazir too,' says one official who has served both. 'They would like nothing better than to see the two hang side by side.'"



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