

Nawaz Sharif faces possible death sentence in Pakistan court

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Ousted Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif was dragged before one of the country's notorious anti-terrorism courts in Karachi last Friday for a fifth time in eight days. The prosecution, acting on behalf of the country's new military junta, has filed a case but has requested until December 4 to formally present the charges. These are likely to include criminal conspiracy, kidnapping, attempted murder and hijacking—the last is the most serious and carries the death penalty.

General Pervez Musharaf, who organised the military coup against Sharif on October 12, is seeking to use the trial to try to legitimise his rule. He alleges that Sharif ordered his plane returning from an official visit to Sri Lanka to be diverted from Karachi airport to Nawabshah airport in southern Sindh in order to facilitate his arrest. Musharaf claims that the plane, which was running low on fuel, would have crashed killing him and 200 other passengers if it had not landed at Karachi.

Sharif, who has been in military custody since the coup, has denied the charges. Others accused include Sharif's brother and former Chief Minister of Punjab Province, Shahbaz Sharif, ex-chief of the disbanded Anti-corruption Bureau, Sailor Rehman, and ex-adviser on Sindh Affairs, Ghous Ali Shah. One of the accused, former chief of Civil Aviation Authority, Aminuddin Chaudry, is to give evidence against Sharif and in return has received a pardon.

Speaking to journalists last Friday, Sharif accused the military ruler of carrying out a “personal vendetta” against him and his family and branded the coup as “totally extra-constitutional”. “The military coup was in progress while the plane was still in air and the whole story of plane hijacking is cooked up to dramatise the incident to justify the coup,” he said.

“There is no doubt that I did say very clearly and categorically that the plane should land at the Karachi airport.”

When asked by the *Time* correspondent in the courtroom if he had ordered the hijacking, Sharif replied: “You hijack a plane with a gun. It is the democratically elected government, which has been hijacked. Parliament has been hijacked.... Who says plane hijacking? There was no hijacking.”

The judge in the case has now banned political statements both by the defence and prosecution inside and outside the court—an order that can only undermine any campaign against these politically motivated charges. The anti-terrorism courts were established by Sharif himself to strip away established procedures and speed up convictions in so-called terrorist cases. Once the charge sheet is submitted the trial will last a maximum of seven days.

Sharif and his co-defenders were brought to court last Friday in armoured vehicles under tight security. Police used batons to beat back a protest by supporters of Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League who shouted slogans supporting the deposed prime minister.

Sharif has been granted improved facilities after he complained to reporters of the harsh prison conditions. “The jail authorities keep lights on during the night so that I can't sleep. They also turn on the fan throughout the night but refuse to give me a blanket,” he said.

The military junta is clearly seeking to capitalise on the widespread hostility to the previous Sharif government in order to consolidate its grip on power. Musharaf claims that the coup was necessary in order to end rampant government corruption, which he says is responsible for the country's economic woes. Under the guise of an “anti-corruption drive,” the military regime is cracking down not only on the Pakistan

Muslim League (PML) but also leaders from other political parties.

Musharraf has set-up the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) to "punish loan defaulters and corrupted" and has already named the self-exiled leader of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Benazir Bhutto, as a "proclaimed offender". Musharraf said on November 17 that Bhutto was "wanted in a number of cases". The leader of Mutthihida Quam Movement (MQM), Farooq Sattar, went underground when orders were issued to arrest him on charges on mis-appropriation of funds while he was a minister in the Sindh provincial government. He surrendered to the military authorities last Friday after holding a press conference to rebut charges against him.

The PML is the only party to oppose the charges against Sharif and demand his release. The PPP, the MQM and other opposition parties initially tried to accommodate themselves to the military with Bhutto offering to serve on its interim governing council. When the offer was turned down and Musharraf declared Bhutto a "fugitive from law," the PPP leaders told the press on November 19 that the party was "shocked and dismayed".

There is little sympathy among the working class and impoverished masses of Pakistan for the Sharif government and more broadly for the political parties who represent the interests of the country's small, wealthy elite. It appears that there is little active opposition to the new regime and in some quarters the hope that the military junta will at least clean up the rampant corruption and improve the position of those hard hit by the country's deep economic crisis.

But such hopes are an illusion. The measures now being used against Sharif, Bhutto and others will in the future be used by the military against any opposition to its policies. The military has already announced a "monitoring system" which will serve as its "eyes and ears".

Like the Sharif government, the military junta represents the interests of sections of big business both at home and abroad. Far from improving the living standards of the masses, Musharraf is already laying the groundwork for the implementation of the IMF's austerity measures. Last week the government, on the IMF's recommendations, abandoned the mega housing project announced by Sharif to begin to address the

country's severe lack of decent low cost housing.

The latest military coup in Pakistan follows a pattern. Exploiting the disaffection with the government of the day, the military step in to prevent it from being ousted by a movement of the masses demanding genuine democratic rights and better living standards. Denouncing the corrupt and inept civilian politicians, the generals, who are have the closest connections with the ruling elites, promise to restore democracy after "cleaning up" the government. Having consolidated their power, the junta then proceeds to implement that same capitalist policies as its predecessors, and ruthlessly repress any popular opposition.

Even a recent article in the *New York Times* was compelled to draw attention to the hollowness of the military's promises to restore democracy. "In 1958, Field Marshall M. Ayub Khan announced that 'our ultimate aim is to restore democracy but of the type that people can understand'. In 1969, Gen. A. M. Yahya Khan vowed that 'I have no ambition other than the creation of conditions conducive to the establishment of a constitutional government.' In 1977, Gen. Zia-ul-Haq said 'the survival of this country lies in democracy alone'." Upon seizing power, Zia-ul-Haq, who ruled Pakistan with an iron fist for more than a decade, charged Sulfikar Ali Bhutto—Benazir Bhutto's father—with conspiracy and hanged him.

The ability of Musharraf and the military to get away with this latest charade rests on the lack of a party in Pakistan that seeks to mobilise the widespread disaffection and hostility to the Sharif government and the entire political establishment on the basis of an anti-capitalist program aimed at the root causes of the country's pervasive social inequality and poverty. As a result the junta has been able to exploit the situation for its own reactionary purposes and to begin to implement a program that is diametrically opposed to the interests of the vast majority.



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