

Sharif lawyer killed as Pakistani junta cracks down on opposition

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Events over the last week surrounding the trial of Pakistan's ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif have revealed the growing nervousness in ruling circles over emerging opposition to the country's military junta headed by General Pervez Musharraf.

On March 10, in broad daylight, unidentified gunmen cold-bloodedly murdered Iqbal Raad, one of Sharif's main defence lawyers, and his two assistants in Karachi. Three gunmen armed with pistols and an automatic weapon entered Raad's office, sprayed it with bullets and fled in a waiting car. According to the acting city police chief: "They seemed to be highly trained the way they carried out the murder."

The Musharraf regime formally condemned the murder, attempting to deflect attention from itself by blaming India's intelligence agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). Police investigators speculated that there may be a personal motive behind the killing. But the obvious explanation is that it was carried out for political reasons, most likely by the junta or its political sympathisers, in a bid to intimidate Sharif, his lawyers and supporters.

Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML) immediately blamed the junta for the killing. PML leader Ejaz Shaffi told the *News International* that the "incident was the outcome of a well-hatched conspiracy for which nobody else other than the government could be held responsible." Raad was a PML member, a close collaborator of Sharif, and had played a prominent part in his legal defence.

Sharif and four of his close aides were put on trial following the overthrow of his government last October 12 in a military coup. He has been accused of attempting to prevent Musharraf's aircraft from landing following his return from an official visit to Sri Lanka. The accused are charged with hijacking, kidnapping

and terrorism. They face the death penalty if found guilty.

Following Raad's murder, Sharif's lawyers announced they would boycott the courts until the case was transferred to Islamabad or Lahore. They did not attend the court hearing last Monday. Head of the legal team Khawja Sultan said that he "always felt that there is no adequate security for defence lawyers." After speaking with Sharif, however, the lawyers returned to the case, which has been postponed until next Monday.

The former prime minister's legal team had previously complained that their hotel rooms were bugged and that Sharif's notes had been stolen from his prison cell. Raad's office had been burgled and he had complained of receiving threats prior to his death.

Last Monday, all lawyers in Sind province, including in Karachi, Lahore and Rawalpindi, took part in a strike to condemn Raad's killing. Lawyers speaking at a meeting of the Lahore bar association demanded the arrest of assailants and a return to democracy. On Tuesday police arrested a man called Asif in connection with the murder but he was bailed after an initial interrogation. Police claim they have no definite clues in the case.

Raad was killed as the Musharraf regime was taking measures to crack down on opposition forces. Pakistani authorities announced last weekend that police have filed a complaint against Sharif's wife, accusing her of treason. A police spokesman said Khulsoom Sharif and other PML leaders were being investigated for "making provocative speeches against the armed forces in a bid to create hatred against the government" at a meeting last week in the Pakistani city of Hyderabad. The complaint is the first step towards the official filing of charges.

On Wednesday, just a week before Clinton is due to

visit Pakistan briefly as part of his tour of the Indian subcontinent, the junta announced that all public rallies and strikes were banned. Only indoor political meetings without loudspeakers are permitted. An Interior Ministry statement claimed: “There are reports that elements working against the interest of the state are preparing and planning hostile acts to create chaos and portray Pakistan as an irresponsible state. The country cannot afford the luxury of agitation and violence-prone politics which disrupts the normal public life.”

The junta is clearly concerned about the visit by Clinton, who only decided to put Pakistan on his itinerary at the last minute. Clinton is expected to press Musharraf for a crackdown on Islamic fundamentalist groups, particularly those backing Kashmiri separatists, and for pressure to be applied to the Taleban regime in Afghanistan to curb its support for Islamic groups within the region.

But the decision to ban strikes and rallies goes beyond the Clinton visit. Support for the junta is evaporating rapidly and the Sharif trial could become a focal point for gathering opposition to the military. That is why the prosecution has insisted that Sharif's defence statements be heard in closed court and be vetted before release. The judge agreed to the demand. After a short-lived protest by the defence lawyers, Sharif delivered his first statement in answer to the charges on March 9.

Sharif accused Musharraf of having grudges against him “on a number of counts” and said he had received “credible information” that the military chief was planning to overthrow his legally elected government. Sharif told the courts that he removed the army chief from his post on October 12 to prevent a conspiracy. He said the differences with Musharraf arose during the crisis last year over the Kargil region of Kashmir. Under US pressure Sharif ordered army-backed separatist guerillas to withdraw from Indian territory.

Sharif flatly denied that he had attempted to kill Musharraf. “There is no evidence on record against me or my co-accused that we had any intention to abduct or murder any person on board the plane,” he said. “Rather it has been established on record that both pilot Sarwart Hussain and his aircraft were under the control of General Pervez Musharraf.”

He described how he was treated after his arrest. “I was thrown into what was more of a dungeon, for

which I forgot I was in my country. I felt as if I was a prisoner of war in a Nazi state, with no light to see, no one to talk to, no paper to read, no contact with my family...

“Even today I am taken to court in an armoured personal carrier and surrounded by hordes of policemen and paramilitary personnel. Armed men belonging to the army and rangers are posted around my cell... Intelligence agencies swarm around me and when I am in the court, my belongings and luggage in the prison cell are searched, whatever papers prepared for this case are taken away, rather stolen...”

The trial is expected to conclude within two to three weeks.



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