Pakistani junta arrests hundreds in crackdown on opposition parties

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Pakistan's military regime headed by General Pervez Musharraf carried out a widespread crackdown on opposition parties to prevent a protest rally in the provincial capital of Lahore on March 23—Pakistan Day—calling for the restoration of parliamentary democracy and early national elections.

In the days leading up to the demonstration, police rounded up an estimated 2,000 activists from the 16-party Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (ARD) formed last December to oppose the junta. The alliance includes the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) of ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

Among those detained were 28 political leaders, including ARD leader Nawabzada Nasurullah Khan, PML acting president Javad Hashmi and ARD secretary general Zafar Iqbal Jhagra. On the day of the rally, 6,000 police were deployed to prevent people from assembling at the venue, Mochi Gate Park, which was sealed off with barbed wire barricades. Hundreds of people were arrested trying to take part in the rally and others were detained when they marched to the Nawabzada's house.

The district military administration in Lahore attempted to justify the repression by saying that the measures were taken "to protect general public and the property" and claimed that most of those detained had been released. However, the real purpose of the police crackdown—the most widespread since Musharraf seized power in October 1999—was to shore up the regime, which is facing sharp economic difficulties as well as growing social tensions and unrest.

The detentions coincided with the second phase of local elections being held in 20 of the country's districts. No political parties were permitted to stand candidates in the poll, which is being held to provide democratic window-dressing for the military regime. The first phase took place in December and the protracted process is due to be completed in August.

Two days before the police crackdown, on March 19, the ruling junta met in Islamabad to discuss how to consolidate their rule. According to a report in the *Times of India*, the "commanders discussed among other issues a comprehensive political strategy to consolidate the army's hold on power." One plan was to appoint Musharraf as the country's president with greater powers under a changed constitution. Musharraf also used the meeting to promote eight generals loyal to him.

Musharraf has since hinted at his plans to retain power beyond the October 2002 deadline for elections by the Supreme Court. In an interview with the *Washington Times*, he said that "the Pakistani environment is not fully conducive to real parliamentary democracy, as it is understood in the West" and alluded to the possibility of changing the constitution to strengthen the presidency.

At a press conference on March 25, he bluntly ruled out retiring as scheduled this October and indicated that time was "already short" to prepare for national elections next year. When asked whether he planned to seek the presidency, Musharraf said it was within the "strategy and parameters of the government... whatever needed to be done would be done surely."

While the opposition is seeking to exploit the junta's growing unpopularity, its leaders have made clear that their aim is not to get rid of the dictatorship but to reach a political accommodation with it. During a recent press conference, Nawabzada warned the military that the suppression of opposition parties would only "create a gap which would be filled by undemocratic forces" and lead to further protests. He also held out the possibility of talks with the junta, saying that ARD "has not closed doors for negotiations."

There are already splits in the opposition ranks. Members of the PML loyal to Sharif, who is now in exile in Saudi Arabia, supported the Lahore rally but his

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opponents refused to collaborate with Bhutto's PPP. Sharp divisions have also emerged within the PML over the election of a new party president.

The international response to the police roundup has been distinctly muted. The US State Department issued a perfunctory statement saying that the arrests "hamper Pakistan's return to democracy". The British Commonwealth called on Musharraf to announce a plan for democratic rule. Far from seeking Musharraf's removal, these routine protests are simply a means to keep the pressure on the military to implement the policies demanded by the major powers, including the economic measures dictated by the IMF and World Bank.

Pakistan's deteriorating economy

Pakistan is in desperate need of further financial assistance. At his press conference on March 25, Musharraf admitted "debt servicing has gone up to $US36 billion from $14 billion during last 11 years." The amount is now equal to 55 percent of the budget expenditure and equivalent to the country's total foreign exchange earnings. Most of what is left of the budget—26 percent—goes to the military, leaving little for health, education and other services. Musharraf made an appeal to the country's rich to each lend $200,000 to help the treasury out of its precarious position.

The administration has been forced to successively revise its estimates for economic growth for the financial year to June—from 5.5 to 5 percent and to the current estimate of 4 percent. The trade deficit for the first seven months of this financial year has increased to $1.4 billion—up by 22.5 percent over the same period in the previous year. According to an International Labor Organisation report, 6 percent of the workforce is unemployed and another 15 million people are underemployed.

The regime is proceeding with its restructuring and privatisation program, which will inevitably lead to more job losses. It plans this month to auction 868 indebted private sector companies, which have 107 billion rupees in outstanding public sector loans. At the same time, state-owned banks will close 588 branches and retrench 50 percent of their workforce.

Franco Passacantando, head of a World Bank delegation to Pakistan, last week called on the junta to speed up its economic restructuring. "We appreciate the government's structural economic reform which we believe needs faster implementation," he told a press conference. So far the IMF has released only one installment of its loans to Pakistan—last year after the regime imposed a general sales tax and began the privatisation of state enterprises.

In a revealing statement, the Finance Minister Saukhat Aziz admitted last month that "more and more people are slipping below the poverty line and social indicators are deteriorating... Above all, the people of Pakistan are losing confidence in the government's ability to manage its affairs." But he emphasised that the government had to proceed with restructuring in order to get "strong support from the international donors."

Small farmers faced with severe drought have carried out a number of demonstrations. On March 22, the Awami Teherek carried out a protest calling on the government to provide water. Police responded by arresting around 220 people including the organisation's president Rasool Baktish Paligo. According to media reports, the protesters were shouting: "We are at war with General Musharraf."

In a recent press statement, Musharraf's press secretary, Major General Rashid Qureshi, pointed to the mounting social tensions in Pakistan. "The country has witnessed strikes, lockouts and breaks in everyday life causing the loss of billions of rupees," he said. "[We] can no longer afford to put the process of stability and the execution of our policies framed in the best national interest at risk..."

When Musharraf seized power in 1999, he was able to capitalise on the widespread opposition to Sharif and his economic policies. Eighteen months later the junta has proven incapable of resolving the country's economic and social crisis and is resorting to police repression to try to stamp out opposition.

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