

A combustible political situation in Pakistan

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As the US prepares for war in Afghanistan, the military junta in Pakistan headed by General Pervez Musharraf is facing an increasingly volatile domestic situation, with protests against his support for Washington continuing to mount.

On October 2, around 50,000 people took part in a protest organised by the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI) party in Quetta, shouting anti-American slogans and condemning Musharraf for backing the US. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan and its supporters in Pakistan have warned Musharraf that he faces a civil war if his administration supports the US military action.

A local JUI leader Abdul Ghafoor told the crowd: “If General Musharraf supports America, he must be ready to count the dead bodies. Musharraf, your days are numbered. Your government will not last long. America listen carefully: We are ready to fight against you. We are ready for jihad.” According to other JUI leaders, a number of young Pakistanis had left or were ready to leave for Afghanistan to defend the Taliban regime.

With concerns that US strikes are imminent, the Pakistani regime has intensified repressive measures. While the Quetta rally took place without overt police interference, a number of reports indicate that security forces have been active in the city, which has been described as “a hot-bed of Taliban supporters”. According to one reporter: “Quetta is already on war footing.”

The protests are taking place despite a ban on all rallies and demonstrations. Two weeks ago, security forces shot three people dead during demonstrations throughout the country, including in Islamabad, Peshawar, Quetta, Karachi and Lahore. On September 21, more than 5,000 people marched in Peshawar, burnt effigies of Bush and shouted their support for Osama bin Laden. In Karachi, a confrontation quickly erupted

with police, who attacked protestors with tear gas and metal-tipped sticks and then opened fire on the crowd.

The protests highlight Musharraf’s precarious position. Successive Pakistani governments and the military have openly backed the Taliban, providing finance, arms and training for its fighters. Many of the Afghans and Pakistanis who belong to the Taliban, including its leadership, were educated in the *madrassas* or religious schools inside Pakistan run by the JUI and other Islamic organisations. Pakistan was one of just three countries to extend diplomatic recognition to the Taliban regime.

Following the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, Musharraf was compelled to make an abrupt turn or face the prospect of complete international isolation. Well aware that any US military strike against Afghanistan will rapidly inflame opposition at home, Musharraf has attempted to pressure the Taliban into acceding to the US demands. Last week a Pakistani delegation made a last-ditch, unsuccessful attempt to persuade the Taliban to hand over bin Laden.

Musharraf has since warned that confrontation is inevitable and that the Taliban’s days are numbered. A Pakistani foreign ministry spokesman issued a statement yesterday, saying that the government had seen the evidence compiled by the US against bin Laden and claimed that the “material certainly provides sufficient basis for indictment in a court of law”. The comments cement Pakistan’s support for the US war drive and are certain to produce further anti-government protests.

The US administration is well aware of the difficulties facing Musharraf and has abruptly dropped previous criticisms of the military junta. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage indicated this week that the US would attempt to minimise the use of Pakistan as a base for military operations in

Afghanistan. “It is recognised... that Pakistan is a fragile political society and we don’t want to burden Pakistan with more than we absolutely need,” he said. In a bid to shore up Pakistan’s shaky economic situation, the US has lifted the sanctions imposed after the India-Pakistan nuclear tests in 1998 and provided some limited financial assistance.

There are fears that opposition over the US war plans will meet up with widespread alienation produced by the country’s explosive social crisis. According to the official *Economic Survey of 2000-2001*, poverty levels have doubled from 17.3 percent in 1987-88 to 33.5 in 1998-99. A government study published last July estimated that, “50 percent of the urban population lives below poverty line”. The same study stated that unemployment was six times higher in 1998-99 than in 1970-71. Around 40 percent of people are illiterate and 35 to 50 percent of the population live in slums.

Though the US has rescheduled loans worth \$3 billion, country’s total foreign debt is about \$37 billion. Repayments, along with defence spending, consume the bulk of the budget. Pakistan’s trade deficit has increased by 21 percent in the first six months of this year. The growth rate was just 2.6 percent last year—below the average rate of countries in the region.

Along with other opposition leaders, Benazir Bhutto, head of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), has endorsed Musharraf’s support for the US. But she has also expressed concern that “an anarchy-like situation” will be created if the government proceeds with IMF economic restructuring measures. Bank employees and Sui Southern Gas Company workers have already been protesting against job losses.

Pakistan’s privatisation minister Altaf Saleem announced yesterday that the government was postponing its \$US1 program of sell-offs, including nine oil and gas fields and a 26 percent shareholding in the state telephone firm Pakistan Telecommunications. As Saleem explained, foreign firms were pulling their staff out of the country because of the risk of unrest, and the prospect of foreign investors buying state assets was dim. The postponement will further exacerbate Pakistan’s financial problems.

The pittance in economic assistance given by the US and its allies to Pakistan will at best provide the junta with a brief respite from its immediate financial straits but will do nothing to end the country’s worsening

social crisis. Any protracted US military action in Afghanistan is certain to ignite what is already an explosive political situation in Pakistan.



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