

# Pakistani leader faces an uncertain future as protests continue

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US Secretary of State Colin Powell flew into Pakistan yesterday in an effort to ensure the military junta's continuing support for the US bombardment of neighbouring Afghanistan. The regime headed by General Pervez Musharraf is treading a fine line as it faces daily protests against the US air strikes in the major cities and calls by Islamic fundamentalist parties for the ousting of the administration.

Powell arrived on the same day that Islamic groups called a nationwide strike. Markets and bazaars were closed in Quetta, a border city with a large Afghan refugee population. In Lahore, some shops shut and around 4,000 protesters took to the streets, demanding that Musharraf end support for the US military effort. In the southern town of Jacobabad near the Shahbaz Air Base, the business district was shut.

The previous day, Jacobabad was the scene of violent clashes between police and several thousand protesters who tried to enter the airport to prevent its use by the US military. One demonstrator was shot dead and 12 others were injured when police opened fire on the crowd. Over 300 were arrested. Police later raided the local offices of Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI) and Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) and detained another 200 activists, including four leaders.

Protests have continued across Pakistan despite heavy police crackdowns that resulted in at least four deaths last week. In a bid to curb the opposition, the junta ordered the house arrest of the leaders of three Islamic groups. Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI) leader Fazul ur Rehman was detained on October 7 followed by two others—Maulana Sami ul Haq, a Peshawar religious leader, and Maulana Azam Tariq, leader of a Sunni Muslim group Sipah e Sahaba.

Last week, another JUI leader, Maulana Atta-ur-Rehman, denounced the US and called for a “national

revolt,” including the army, against Musharraf regime. “The Pakistan army is paid by the nation so they should turn against those who are supporting the American terrorists,” he said.

These remarks highlight the political dilemma confronting the Musharraf regime. Following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the US, Washington pressured Musharraf into abruptly dropping his previous support for the Taliban in Afghanistan. For two decades, the army and the powerful Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) have had close relations with the Taliban, as well as with the JUI and other Islamic groups now organising the anti-government and anti-US protests.

Musharraf last week moved to shore up his support in the army by forcing the resignation of two top generals—ISI chief Mahmood Ahmed and deputy chief of staff, Musaffar Usmani. Another key general, Mohammed Aziz, was removed as Lahore military commander and transferred to another position. The three are known to be pro-Taliban. Significantly, they are considered to be supporters of Musharraf's ousting of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in October 1999.

Musharraf clearly fears that the protests will grow as the US military strikes continue. While backing Bush's “war against terrorism,” Musharraf has repeatedly called for the military campaign to be ended quickly. Yesterday *CBS* and *USA Today* reported the Pakistani president commenting that the quickest way for the US to achieve its objectives was to kill the Taliban leader Mullah Omar. Musharraf rapidly issued a public denial, obviously concerned that his off-the-cuff remarks would inflame the protests.

Powell's visit will place the Musharraf regime under further pressure. The British-based *Times* reported that US military and intelligence chiefs are already

frustrated with the ISI's failure to provide sufficiently detailed information on the Taliban, as well as Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaida organisation. US demands for further intelligence will only deepen the rifts within the military regime.

Media reports indicate that Powell wants to discuss the type of regime the US is planning to install in Kabul. Musharraf has publicly warned the US and Britain against relying on the opposition Northern Alliance, which has been working in collaboration with the US and British military campaign. For seven years, Pakistan has backed the Taliban against the Northern Alliance, which has been supported by Russia, Iran and Islamabad's arch-rival, India. An unnamed general told the *Guardian* newspaper that if the Pakistani leader agrees to any plan for a Northern Alliance government, "whatever support General Musharraf has would completely erode".

Kashmir—the other issue that Powell and Musharraf will discuss—is even more explosive. Bush has urged India and Pakistan to avoid military conflict over the contested region. US National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice announced over a week ago that she, Bush and Powell had been ringing Indian and Pakistani leaders to emphasise the importance of "not having a flare-up" over Kashmir. "There's a lot of diplomatic infrastructure in place to try to tamp this down," she said.

But for all Washington's efforts to "tamp down" Kashmir, the US bombing of Afghanistan has exacerbated the tensions inside Kashmir and between India and Pakistan. Musharraf has called on the US to assist in negotiations over the disputed territory and has written to Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee calling for talks between the two countries. India turned down the offer, continuing its traditional insistence that Kashmir's status is an internal, not an international issue.

New Delhi is also concerned that closer relations between Washington and Islamabad will work against India. To make the point that India will defend its interests in Kashmir, the Indian military launched a barrage of attacks on Pakistani positions on the day that Powell landed in Islamabad. According to Pakistani reports, at least one woman was killed and another 25 people were injured during 40 minutes of mortar and rocket attack by Indian troops. New Delhi claimed that

the military action was in retaliation for attacks by Kashmiri separatist fighters inside Indian-controlled Jammu and Kashmir.

Far from calming the situation, Powell's visit serves to underscore just how volatile the Indian subcontinent is becoming as the US continues its military aggression against Afghanistan.



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