

Pakistan's military ruler holds referendum to tighten grip on power

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With the support of the Bush administration, Pakistan's military dictator, General Pervez Musharraf, is staging a national referendum today to give a popular fig leaf to his continued rule.

The referendum asks Pakistani voters to approve Musharraf, the Chief of Pakistan's Armed Services, remaining the country's president for a further five years. The result is a foregone conclusion. Musharraf has corralled the machinery of state behind his referendum campaign, staging phony mass rallies and blanketing the airwaves with his propaganda, while using state security forces to mute the opposition. For the benefit of a pliant Western media, Musharraf allowed a lone opposition rally to be held during the referendum campaign, and that in its dying days.

Nonetheless there have been numerous signs of widespread opposition. On April 25 lawyers across Pakistan boycotted the courts to protest against the referendum. Angered by media reports pointing to the fraudulent nature of the "Yes" rallies, Musharraf and his backers have lashed out at the press. Both of the country's main political parties—the Pakistan People's Party led by Benazir Bhutto and the Pakistan Muslim League of Nawaz Sharif—are calling for the electorate to boycott the referendum, although over the past three years both have accommodated themselves to the military regime. In an attempt to dampen expectations, Musharraf has himself said he would be pleased with a 30 percent voter turnout.

After seizing power in an October 1999 coup, Musharraf claimed the military would rule the country for a three-year period, after which time fresh elections would be held to the national and provincial parliaments and civilian rule restored. In fact, Musharraf and the military have arrogated ever-more power. In June 2001, the General pushed aside President Rafiq Tarar, who had continued to serve after the overthrow of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and made himself president. With today's referendum Musharraf is trying to circumvent both his pledge to restore civilian rule and a provision in the constitution that stipulates the president is chosen by the members of the National Assembly and Senate.

Musharraf has signaled that once the referendum "legitimizes" his rule, he will push through changes to the constitution meant to ensure that whatever the outcome of the elections promised for next October, he and the military will remain the country's ultimate political authority. Musharraf is proposing that the military-dominated National Security Council (NSC) be delegated under the constitution to oversee the work of the elected politicians

and civilian government. In an interview April 28, Musharraf said the NSC will ensure that the "national interest" prevails and that the changes made by his government are "irreversible." "Should anyone try to reverse these reforms or acted in a manner which was against the national interest, the NSC will play its role."

The stage-managed referendum is a product of a deep-going crisis of the Pakistani ruling class and its state. Unable to develop a progressive program to overcome the legacy of Pakistan's belated capitalist development and colonial oppression, the Pakistani ruling class has for decades systematically looted state resources, while seeking to neutralize the threat from below by fanning religious fundamentalism and national-ethnic conflicts within Pakistan and by stoking geo-political and military conflict with archrival India.

Musharraf's main bases for support for his latest power grab are Pakistani big business and Washington. The Federation of Pakistani Chambers of Commerce and Industry has supported the referendum because it sees Musharraf's IMF-dictated economic agenda as the best-way to attract foreign investment and his authoritarian rule as the best-means to withstand popular resistance to the dismantling of state programs and controls that have provided a modicum of support to the working class and peasantry.

Conscious of the opposition of the broad masses, Musharraf has announced various populist measures to support farmers and small business and declared that the eradication of poverty—30 percent of the population lives on less than \$1 a day—is his top priority. But Musharraf has won Washington's support by implementing privatization and deregulation programs that have only exacerbated the plight of Pakistan's rural and urban poor. "Over the last two years," declared an IMF report last December, "Pakistan has established a record of sound macroeconomic management and timely implementation of structural reforms." Currently, the Musharraf regime is implementing a \$6 billion privatization scheme that includes the sell-off of banks and electrical power utilities.

Musharraf would be unable to maintain his grip on power were it not for the support he has received from the US government. Many commentators have noted the similarities between the support given to Musharraf and that given to General Zia-ul-Haq during the 1980s, when the US was using Pakistan to conduct a proxy war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union. Zia also came to power in a military coup, and was able to solidify his power through a fraudulent referendum with the complicity of the American

government.

When Musharraf seized power in 1999, the US made only mildest of criticisms, repeating the general's claims that civilian rule had only been temporarily suspended. In September of last year, the Bush administration drew closer to Musharraf when he threw his support behind it campaign to unseat the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which hitherto had been a close ally of Pakistan. In return, Pakistan received \$1 billion in aid and an agreement to restructure its enormous debt burden (68 percent of GNP). But the war has also had major negative consequences on Pakistan's economy, with both foreign investment and external trade falling.

At a meeting at the US Treasury Department last week, Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill and Pakistan Finance Minister Shaukat Aziz signed a Memorandum of Understanding to set up a joint economic forum. While details of the meeting are sparse, the two are said to have discussed economic reform in Pakistan "to support more rapid, broad-based and job-creating growth," code words for further privatization and the elimination of restrictions on foreign capital. The meeting last week grew out of Musharraf's visit with President Bush in February. At that time, Musharraf secured the praise of the US president, who called him "a leader with great courage and vision."

The American military has also strengthened its ties with the Pakistani military. The two have worked together closely in the campaign against Afghanistan. Recent reports indicate that American military units have been conducting operations within the borders of Pakistan itself. Bush recently increased by \$145 million the amount of money he has requested Congress to provide to Pakistan, much of which will go to support military operations.

All this has translated into a green light from Washington for Musharraf to renege on his pledge to step down from power. In glaring contrast to its propaganda about creating democratic institutions in Pakistan's neighbor, Afghanistan, the US is prepared to support a military dictator just to the south. A spokesman for the US Embassy said, "It's up to the Pakistani courts and the Pakistani people to decide." Accepting Musharraf's claims, he said that the referendum "is the beginning of a process that will lead to democratic elections."

Shafqat Mahmood, in a column in the English-language Pakistani daily *Dawn* noted, "[The United States] would look the other way even if there were widespread rigging in the referendum. They are not bothered about legal niceties or pristine processes as long as they have an active partner in their war against terrorism."

At the same time, some elements within the American ruling class are warning that concentrating power in Musharraf's hands in an attempt to suppress social tensions and contradictions could well fail, and at the expense of US interests. An editorial in the *Washington Post* earlier this month said, "no doubt some Bush administration officials would like to perpetuate a relationship with Pakistan that allows the United States to do business with a single, relatively cooperative general. But a likely outcome of the referendum initiative is a weakened leader who will be mired in power struggles with civilian politicians elected in October. The administration can do a service for both itself and Mr. Musharraf by urging him to negotiate any changes in the political system with

the political parties, rather than dictating reforms."

While Musharraf is trying to use Washington's backing to tighten his grip on power, the US intervention in Afghanistan and its world anti-terrorist war has produced multiple new pressures on his regime. In breaking with the Taliban, the Pakistani elite had to accept an inglorious end to a 20-year attempt to tie Afghanistan to Pakistan's economy and geo-political strategy. This strategic defeat and the US's anti-terrorism rhetoric then provided India's Hindu chauvinist government with an opportunity to intensify military and political pressure on Pakistan. As a result of these twin crises, Musharraf was forced to turn on the military's traditional allies in the far-right religious groups, allies that had been cultivated with American support during the time of Zia.

Musharraf has tried to curry favor with both the US and the Pakistani masses with his campaign against Islamic extremism. But there are definite limits to this campaign, and not just because powerful elements in the military and intelligence apparatus remain tied to them. Over the past quarter-century Islamic fundamentalism has become ever more central to the legitimizing ideology of the Pakistani state.

In recent months, Musharraf has continued to blow hot and cold on his campaign against the Islamic right and the related issue of the insurgency in the Indian-state of Jammu and Kashmir. (So as to bring the Kashmir agitation more under the direct control of Islamabad, Pakistan's military has, since the early 1990s, given the bulk of its logistical and political support to Islamic extremist Kashmiri groups.)

Just prior to announcing the referendum, the Musharraf regime released many of the Islamic leaders who were arrested during the American bombardment of Afghanistan last year. During his referendum campaign, Musharraf accused the ex-Prime Ministers Sharif and Benazir Bhutto of having tried to "sell off" Kashmir to India and vowed that he would not shrink from using nuclear weapons in a war with India if Pakistan's territorial integrity was threatened.

While Musharraf has had to lash out against the Islamic right, the principal target of his authoritarian regime is the working class and oppressed masses. Although almost completely ignored in the Western media, his regime has used the "war on terrorism" to place still greater restrictions on any independent activity of the working class. This was evident in January when security forces cracked down on those demonstrating against war with India.

Musharraf will win his referendum, but looming on the horizon are major social conflicts.



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