

Anti-democratic measures guarantee Pakistan's election will be a sham

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Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf has announced National and Provincial assembly elections for October 10 in a bid to give his regime a democratic veneer and a degree of legitimacy. But a series of sweeping constitutional changes and presidential decrees announced over the last month ensure that Musharraf, not parliament, will wield power after the elections. The military junta is setting the rules for the election and at the same time ensuring that those elected will have no significant say in the running of the country.

Musharraf had himself endorsed as president for five years in a referendum in April, which was widely regarded as rigged. If his proposed constitutional changes come into force, he will be able to change the prime minister and dissolve the cabinet and parliament unilaterally. He will also have wide powers to appoint senior judges, state bureaucrats and provincial officials as well as to sack individuals for "serious abuse of authority, failure to check corruption, compromising national security interests and violation of the constitution". The interpretation is left up to the president—namely Musharraf.

The proposed constitutional changes will also entrench the military as the overseers of the political process through the establishment of a permanent 11-member, policy-making National Security Council (NSC). While the council will contain the prime minister, opposition leader and four provincial chief ministers, the military will call the shots. Not only will Musharraf, as president, preside over the council but it will contain the joint military chief of staff as well as the three chiefs of the army, navy and airforce. The NSC will have the power to veto the decisions of parliament and will be answerable to the president, not the prime minister.

In a national television address on July 12, Musharraf attempted to defend his anti-democratic measures by attacking the record of previous governments. "There has

never been true democracy in Pakistan," he said. He appealed to criticism, saying: "All amendments are debatable. Give your views with patience and balance and we will respect your views." With the period of "consultation" almost over, however, there is every indication that he will ignore widespread opposition and implement the amendments.

In addition to the constitutional changes, Musharraf has issued a series of presidential decrees that severely restrict who is able to stand as an election candidate. Only university graduates will be eligible, effectively ruling out 98 percent of the population. As a result, more than half of the previous parliament will be barred from contesting the elections, including two former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. The country's Supreme Court again demonstrated its subservience to the military when on July 12, it dismissed a petition challenging the anti-democratic character of this decree.

To make doubly sure that neither Sharif nor Bhutto will become a challenge, Musharraf decreed on July 6 that no one could be prime minister more than twice. In a further attempt to undermine the standing of his opponents, the Musharraf regime has pursued legal cases against them. A special court sentenced Bhutto on July 9 to three years in jail and ordered the confiscation of her property for failing to appear to answer charges of corruption. Bhutto, who has been in exile, faces arrest if she returns to Pakistan.

Sharif is also in exile. Musharraf seized power in a military coup in October 1999, ousting prime minister Sharif who he accused of corruption. Sharif was put on trial in a special anti-terrorism court on trumped up charges of having attempted to kill the general by preventing his plane from landing on the day of the military coup. He was found guilty and jailed, but later allowed to leave the country.

Musharraf's anti-democratic measures do not stem from a position of political strength. He came to power with the

backing of the military and Islamic fundamentalist groups that were incensed over Sharif's decision to bow to pressure from Washington and withdraw support from militants entrenched in the Kargil areas of India's Jammu and Kashmir.

After the terrorist attacks on the US on September 11, Musharraf alienated sections of his own base by ending support for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and agreeing to demands from Washington to crack down on Islamic extremist groups in Pakistan. The Pakistani leader has also generated opposition by continuing to pursue the economic restructuring measures demanded by the IMF and World Bank that have led to widening unemployment and poverty. He is proceeding with plans to sell off some of the country's largest state-owned enterprises including the banks, oil and gas companies.

Three months ago, he had cobbled together a coalition of minor parties known as the National Alliance to contest the October elections. However, according to a recent article in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, "[S]ince then their leaders have either abandoned the alliance or left on long holidays in London to avoid being pressured by the intelligence agencies."

The press, major political parties and civil rights groups are near unanimous in their opposition to the proposed changes. As Hina Jilani, secretary general of the Human Rights Commission in Pakistan scathingly commented: "Why bother having an election when the army sets the rules and the candidates and will rig the outcome?"

Muttahida Majilis-e-Amal, an alliance of six Islamic parties, issued a statement last week, saying: "The government should avoid amendments in the constitution and this task should be left to the next elected parliament." Liaqat Baloch, leader of the Islamic Jammaat-i-Islami, issued a press statement, declaring: "The army ruler does not have a right to change the constitution."

All the major parties, including Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League (PML), are part of a 16-party Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (ARD), which has strongly opposed the constitutional changes and called for a caretaker government to replace Musharraf. PML spokesman Siddiqui Farooq described the amendments as "an effort to change the basic structure of the constitution and designed to make the sovereign parliament subservient to the will of one man." A PPP statement said that if implemented the changes if "will ring the death knell of democracy in the country."

Far from appealing to the masses, however, these parties

are calling on the major powers, the US in particular, to get Musharraf to change his plans. ARL leader Nawabzada Nasrullah, who has described the constitutional amendments as "the murder of democracy," appealed for support from international human rights bodies. Bhutto, who was recently in the US, was more specific, calling on Washington to control Musharraf's "undemocratic acts and pressure him to hold free and fair general election".

The Bush administration is clearly backing the military dictator and his anti-democratic methods. Far from criticising the constitutional changes, the US has declared that the October election will establish democracy in Pakistan. According to the *Frontier Post* on July 20, the Bush administration has even pledged \$US2 million to the junta as election assistance to help arrange the fraud.

US support for the military strongman is fuelling resentment. According to the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, "Public anger is not reserved for Musharraf: the Americans get their share as well, as in many peoples' eyes Musharraf is only getting away with his plans because of unstinting US support due to his cooperation in tracking down Al Qaeda." Under the pretext of "fighting terrorism", hundreds of US Special Forces, CIA operatives and FBI officials have been given free rein in Pakistan establishing a growing US presence in the country.

While Musharraf appears to be in control, a groundswell of opposition is developing to his dictatorial methods. Whatever the final outcome of the elections in October, the resulting government will have no legitimacy in the eyes of the majority of the population. Far from stabilising Musharraf's rule, the poll is likely to intensify the country's political crisis.



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