

Pakistani strongman imposes anti-democratic constitutional changes

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Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf has imposed 29 sweeping constitutional changes that make a mockery of his claims to be returning the country to democratic rule through general elections scheduled for October 10. The amendments enacted by presidential fiat on August 21 ensure that Musharraf and the military will continue to hold effective power, whatever the outcome of the poll.

Under the constitutional changes, Musharraf as president can dissolve the elected parliament and provincial assemblies at his own discretion and appoint and sack provincial governors. The president will also have the power to appoint the chairman of the joint chief of staff and the heads of all three military services, as well as Supreme Court justices.

While the country will have a prime minister and a cabinet after the election, the military will retain a veto over all major policy decisions through the establishment of a National Security Council (NSC). Musharraf will preside as chief of the council, which will also include the military chief of staff, the heads of the army, navy and air force, the prime minister, opposition leader and four provincial chief ministers.

The constitutional changes were first announced in June to provide for a period of token consultation. In the face of widespread opposition from political parties, human rights organisations and the media, Musharraf did not proceed with a few of his initial proposals, including to reduce the term of office for parliamentarians. These modifications, however, do nothing to alter the fact that power will remain firmly in his hands.

Musharraf told a press conference on 22 August: "If the future parliament tries to reverse these amendments they will have to quit or I will quit." Questioned about the legality of the amendments, Musharraf declared: "I

am hereby making it a part of the constitution through the powers given to me by the Supreme Court. I do not need the assembly's approval."

He made clear that no one would be permitted to challenge his rule. Asked what would happen if opposition parties won the election, he said: "They'd better perform for Pakistan. If they start attacking me and it's politicking again and intrigue and taking the country down, they will not be allowed to do it."

Musharraf's decision to unilaterally amend the constitution to shore up his rule indicates his administration's growing isolation. In ousting former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in 1999, Musharraf was able to exploit the widespread hostility to the civilian government's economic restructuring policies and corrupt practices. He had the backing of the military and Islamic extremist groups who were critical of Sharif for bowing to US pressure to curb armed Islamic militants fighting Indian troops in Jammu and Kashmir.

Much of Musharraf's support has evaporated over the past three years. Islamic groups and sections of the military have been alienated by his decision to support the US-led war on Afghanistan and to accede to Washington's demands for a crackdown on Islamic fundamentalist organisations in Pakistan. Moreover, in return for limited financial assistance, Musharraf has been compelled to press ahead with market reforms that have deepened the social divide between rich and poor.

Musharraf has sought to legitimise his rule by holding a referendum on his presidency in April and preparing for general elections in October. But the referendum result has been widely condemned as rigged and the October election heavily criticised. The British-based *Economist* magazine recently pointed out that Musharraf's personal security was no longer certain, noting that he had cancelled a speaking engagement in

Karachi in August on the advice of his intelligence chiefs.

A measure of Musharraf's isolation is the resurgence of support for two former prime ministers—Pakistan Muslim League (PML) leader Nawaz Sharif and Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) leader Benazir Bhutto—both of whom had been broadly discredited prior to the 1999 coup. In part, the constitutional amendments were aimed at preventing Sharif and Bhutto from standing as candidates. In the absence of any alternative, Musharraf fears that they could become the focal point for mounting opposition to his regime.

Zafarulla Khan, a Pakistani social scientist, told the *New York Times* in August that if the elections were “free and fair” the two opposition parties would win a majority of seats. The director of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, A. Rahman, expressed the same view, saying: “At the moment the political parties may be disorganised, but the general has given them significant material to revive themselves.”

The Election Commission initially rejected applications by Bhutto and Sharif to participate in the October election. When questioned by journalists, Musharraf angrily condemned the two, declaring: “What is your view that the looters and plunders would be condoned by the people?” He warned that Sharif and Bhutto would be arrested if they tried to return to Pakistan.

Bhutto, who was prime minister in 1988 and again in 1993, has been living in London and Dubai in self-imposed exile for several years. Last month she was convicted in absentia on corruption charges and sentenced to three years jail. Following the 1999 coup, Sharif was convicted and jailed on a series of trumped-up charges but then permitted to leave the country. He is currently in exile in Saudi Arabia.

In a crude attempt to split the opposition, the Election Commission reversed its earlier decision and accepted Sharif's nomination on August 30 while rejecting Bhutto's nomination the following day. Sharif has since withdrawn his candidacy in solidarity with Bhutto, who is appealing the commission's ruling in the courts. Her petition is due to be heard on September 11.

Both Bhutto and Sharif have criticised Musharraf and declared that they will campaign for a return to democracy. Bhutto has described Musharraf as a “tin

pot dictator” and threatened to return to Pakistan, to fight the junta from jail if necessary. At the same time, she has already indicated that her party will collaborate with the military administration if it wins the election. “In the high interest, my party kept the doors of dialogue open with the military regime to facilitate the process of the democratisation in Pakistan,” she explained to a rally in London last month.

The two leaders recognise that Musharraf continues to have the support of the Bush administration. Bhutto has made a bid for Washington's backing by offering herself as a more consistent supporter of the US “global war on terrorism”. She has accused Musharraf of being too lenient on Islamic extremist organisations by releasing some of their members rounded up under pressure from the US. She has called on the US to intervene in Pakistan to ensure the holding of “free and fair elections”.

The US State Department issued a mild formal criticism of the constitutional changes. Spokesman Philip Reeker commented: “We are concerned that his recent decisions could make it more difficult to build strong democratic institutions in Pakistan.” US President Bush effectively overrode the statement, however, when he told reporters that Musharraf “still fights with us in the war against terror and that's what I appreciate”.

The Pakistani leader has continued to receive international financial support. He told IMF managing director Paul Chabrier on August 20 that “the constitutional amendments would help put in place checks and balances required for the continuity of reforms initiated by the government” and pledged to continue the restructuring of the public sector enterprises. Three days later, the US ambassador to Pakistan signed a deal allowing the country to consolidate and restructure \$3 billion in loans.

As Musharraf's base of support continues to shrink, political and economic backing from Washington is the main factor propping up this anti-democratic and increasingly unpopular military regime.



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