Pakistan parliament convened but no government formed

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More than a month after national elections on October 10, Pakistani military strongman General Pervez Musharraf finally convened the National Assembly last weekend, where newly elected MPs took the oath of office. Musharraf, who secured a vote of support in what was widely regarded as a rigged referendum earlier in the year, was sworn in for a five-year term as president. But the whole affair, which was meant to demonstrate that Pakistan was returning to civilian rule, was a charade.

Prior to the national elections, Musharraf issued a series of sweeping presidential decrees to amend the constitution and concentrate power in his own hands. Under the changes known as the Legal Framework Ordinance (LFO), the president has the power to dissolve parliament and sack the prime minister and provincial chief ministers. He will preside over a National Security Council, stacked with military chiefs, which will have veto power over government decisions. Musharraf suspended the constitution when he seized power in a military coup in 1999.

The most striking feature of the parliamentary session is that there is still no government. The assembly meeting was originally scheduled for November 8 but was postponed to allow Musharraf's Pakistani Muslim League Quaid e Azam (PML-Q) to hold further talks with other parties. No viable ruling coalition has been formed, however. The election of the parliamentary speaker was put off until today and no date has been fixed for the election of a prime minister.

Opposition parties, including the Pakistani People's Party (PPP), the Islamic fundamentalist Muttahida Majlis-Amal (MMA) and Pakistani Muslim League of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif (PML-N), have called for restoration of civilian rule and the return to the 1973 constitution. Over the last month, however, all of them have been manoeuvring with Musharraf with a view to reaching an accommodation with the military junta.

Despite the use of ballot rigging and bribes in the October 10 elections, the military-backed PML-Q only won 118 seats in the 342-member parliament—well short of an overall majority. The party began discussions with Benazir Bhutto's PPP which won 81 seats. The PPP insisted that any deal include the lifting of corruption charges against Bhutto and her free return to the country. Musharraf, who regards former Prime Minister Bhutto as a dangerous political rival, refused.

The PML-Q then approached the MMA, an alliance of hard-line Islamic groups, which had obtained 59 seats. The MMA won increased support by campaigning against Musharraf's support for the US war in Afghanistan and the presence of US troops, police and CIA agents inside Pakistan. The PML-Q would not agree to the MMA's demand for the post of prime minister and the withdrawal of the constitutional amendments.

Musharraf called off the scheduled parliamentary meeting on November 8, right at the point when it appeared possible that the Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (ARD)—a grouping comprising of PPP, PML-N and 13 other parties—would bury their differences with the fundamentalist MMA. The military was not prepared to tolerate a government of opposition parties that sidelined the PML-Q.

The Bush administration, which regards Musharraf as an important prop for its military intervention in Afghanistan, has also been involved in the behind-the-scenes wrangling. The Pakistani-based daily, the *News,* reported on November 7 that US Assistant Secretary of State Christina Rocca held a meeting with Bhutto in Washington to voice the Bush administration's

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"displeasure" over the PPP's willingness to support a "hard-line" MMM candidate for the post of prime minister and to encourage the PPP to back Musharraf.

US Under Secretary of State for Economic, Business and Agricultural Affairs Alan Larson visited Pakistan on November 6 to reiterate Washington's support for Musharraf. He met with Musharraf and praised the country's "democratic process". At a press conference in Islamabad, Larson reaffirmed US economic support, declaring that "the issue of $1 billion debt write-off for Pakistan" is "on track".

The military also bullied the PPP not to form an alliance with the MMA. PPP secretary-general Raza Rabbani told the *News* that a number of members had "complained of midnight knocks by police, civil administration and secret agencies, pressuring them to ditch their party" and support Musharraf's party. Musharraf and the military formed the PML-Q just prior to the October elections by engineering a split in Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League.

Under pressure from Musharraf and the US, a group of 10 PPP parliamentarians, who have termed themselves a forward bloc, have broken from the party, accusing Bhutto of having no clear line. Their leader Makhdoom Fazil Saleh told reporters that it was wrong to oppose Musharraf after contesting elections under his amendments and indicated that his faction would support the PML-Q.

Having averted the formation of a government formed by opposition parties, the PML-Q has intensified negotiations to form a coalition. The *Dawn* newspaper reported renewed efforts last week to win over the MMA or a section of it by offering to make cosmetic changes to the constitutional amendments. Last weekend MMA deputy secretary, Hafiz Hussain Ahmed said there were "tangible results" that would be made public.

Whatever the final outcome of the wheeling and dealing, the next government faces a volatile economic and political climate in Pakistan. A recent article in *Business Week* warned that the Pakistan economy could soon face currency devaluations and interest rate hikes. US aid is expected to drop from $600 million in 2001 to $200 million this year. Poverty and unemployment are continuing to grow.

The continued presence of US security personnel as well as Washington's preparations for war against Iraq are generating growing anti-US sentiment. Protests took place against the execution of a Pakistani national, Mir Aimal Kansi, in the US last week over the 1993 killing of two CIA employees near the CIA headquarters in Virginia. Pakistani police were placed on high alert for the opening of parliament over the weekend.

The fact that Musharraf has been unable to form a government despite his rigging of elections and bullying of opposition parties is an indication of the narrow social base on which the military regime rests. The elections, which were held to shore up Musharraf's position, now appear to be compounding his political problems.

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