

Antiwar protests in Pakistan rattle the Musharraf regime

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Large antiwar protests in Pakistani cities over the past two weekends have further undermined the increasingly shaky position of military strongman President Pervez Musharraf. His administration is caught between pressure from Washington for Pakistan to support a resolution in the UN Security Council giving the go ahead for military action, on the one hand, and the popular sentiment against any war, on the other.

Over the past two Sundays—March 2 and 9—tens of thousands have gathered in Karachi and Rawalpindi to demonstrate against the war and demand that Musharraf oppose the Bush administration's plans. While the rallies were organised by Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), an alliance of six Islamic fundamentalist parties, hostility to war is far broader.

The rallies are part of an ongoing series of protests announced last month. Qazi Hussein Ahmad, head of Jamaat-e Islami, one of the MMA partners, warned Musharraf at the time that “the fury and anger of the people will turn on the government if they back the US war”.

Thousands of protesters defied stringent security measures to march and demonstrate against the war in the southern city of Karachi on March 2. The city was particularly tense after a series of raids by police the previous day aimed at rounding up alleged Al Qaeda members. A number of people were arrested in the city of Rawalpindi, including Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, allegedly one of Al Qaeda's top leaders.

Jamaat-e-Islami leader Qazi Hussain Ahmed told the Karachi rally: “We want to tell the US that war on Iraq will be considered an attack on Muslims. And we want to tell Musharraf that if Pakistan votes for the US in the UN Security Council, we will bring his government down.”

Not all the participants were supporters of the Islamic religious parties. Fasih Ahmed, 17, told Reuters: “I just came because I believe Muslims are suffering.” A

businessman told reporters: “I'm against war whether it is between Muslims and Christians or anyone else. War is wrong, it doesn't solve anything.”

Last Sunday around 200,000 people took part in an antiwar protest in Rawalpindi, one of the largest demonstrations in Pakistan in more than a decade. Hundreds of police wearing helmets, wielding sticks and holding metal shields lined the roads. But people flocked to rally—many coming by bus from the North West Frontier Province, Punjab and other parts of the country.

Protesters carried banners declaring “Blood thirsty Bush is an international terrorist,” “We want peace” and “Bush is today's Pharaoh”. Others called for Musharraf to step down. The local press reported cartoons of Bush sipping human blood. An effigy of the US president was burnt and loudspeakers blared out: “Wake up Pakistanis. It's time for jihad. Your Islamic faith is calling on you.”

MMA speakers warned Musharraf that Pakistan should not simply abstain on any vote on war in the UN Security Council but should vote against the resolution. MMA leader Maulana Noorani told the rally that “the whole world is against the American war plans”. He declared that “a regime change in Iraq is just an excuse” for seizing oil supplies in the Middle East and strengthening Israel. The Pakistan Muslim League-N of the former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the Pakistan Tehrik-i-Insaf Party led by Imran Khan also participated in the demonstration.

The Islamic fundamentalist groups are seeking to exploit the widespread hostility to war and to channel the opposition in a reactionary communal direction. But the movement clearly extends to broad layers of society. The underlying political ferment among many social strata is revealed by a growing number of smaller protests and meetings.

On March 8, the Supreme Court Bar Association in Islamabad held a seminar on the theme “Peace in Iraq—US

Violation of United Nations and International Law”. Speakers declared that “the Anglo-US nexus to occupy the world oil resources” was a threat to world peace. The previous day, over 500 women protested in Lahore against any war. According to one report, the women “lashed out at the gangsterism of religious fundamentalists in Karachi against progressive youth, who were distributing leaflets at Karachi University against war on Iraq”.

In the face of the antiwar opposition, Musharraf and Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali have exhibited a growing nervousness about openly supporting the Bush administration’s war plans. Jamali said on national television on Tuesday that his cabinet had taken “a unanimous decision that it will be very difficult for Pakistan to support war against Iraq”. He refused to be pinned down, however, on which way Pakistan would vote in the UN Security Council.

The following day, Bush telephoned Musharraf to press for his support. The Pakistani president is heavily dependent on Washington economically and politically. Addressing a press conference yesterday, Jamali played down the significance of the phone call, declaring “there is no pressure as far we are concerned”. But he refused to indicate how Pakistan would vote, simply appealing for “peace [to] be given a chance”.

Following the phone call, the US announced a \$US30 million package to Pakistan to assist in fighting crime in tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. While the money will no doubt be welcome in official circles, the project is likely to generate further opposition. There is already considerable hostility over the way in which Musharraf has allowed the US military, CIA and FBI to hunt down suspected Al Qaeda members—in particular in the border areas.

Musharraf faces more antiwar demonstrations over the next week. The MMA has scheduled a large rally in Lahore on March 23, to be followed by more protests in Peshawar, Quetta and Faisalabad in North West Frontier Province.



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