

Pakistan extends ban on Islamic groups

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8 December 2003

Under pressure from Washington, Pakistan's military-backed regime last month extended its ban on Islamic fundamentalist organisations to include six new groups and carried out an extensive police crackdown against their membership.

The banned organisations include several armed groups opposed to Indian control of Kashmir, as well as two accused of involvement in sectarian violence within Pakistan—the Shiite-based Islamia Tehrik e Pakistan and the Sunni-based Millat-e-Islam. Islamabad also announced that Jamaat-ud-Dawa, formerly known as Lashkar-e-Taiba, had been put under surveillance. India blamed the group for attacks in Kashmir and the 2001 attack on the Indian parliament building in New Delhi.

Pakistani police closed down more than 150 offices belonging to the six groups. The government has announced that nearly 600 activists will be compelled to pay a bond of up to 100,000 rupees (\$US1,745) as surety of good behaviour. But according to Millat-e-Islamia Pakistan leader Maulana Mohammad Ahmed, arrests are also going ahead with “more than 50 activists from the party detained”.

The government has targetted the bank accounts of the six organisations. As of late November, the State Bank of Pakistan reported that deposits amounting to 879.05 million rupees had been frozen and more were being investigated. Provincial administrations have been directed to check the publications of these groups.

Hours after the bans were announced, police arrested Islamia Tehrik leader Sajjad Naqvi in connection with the murder of a rival Sunni leader, Azam Tariq, in October. The arrest could provoke clashes between the Shiite and Sunni groups.

The military regime has been at pains to say that it was not pressured by the US to take these measures. But on November 13, the US ambassador to Pakistan, Nancy Powell, publicly expressed concern during a

speech in Karachi that Islamic groups banned in early 2002 were reemerging under different names. “[T]hese (Islamic) groups pose a serious threat to Pakistan, to the region, and to the United States,” she said.

Just two days later, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf announced the first bans on November 15 and then further measures on November 20. He told a cabinet meeting on November 16: “Only Pakistan can play the key role in the global war on terrorism that countries such as the United States have requested.” In the face of mounting criticisms, he insisted that the bans were in “the national interest” and necessary for “for the country’s economic progress”.

Interior Minister Faisal Saleh Hayat announced on November 18 that a bill to monitor the country’s madrassas [Islamic religious schools] would be placed before the cabinet in the next few months. Such a step would provoke widespread opposition from Islamic fundamentalist groups.

US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher expressed “appreciation for the steps” taken by Pakistan and called for continuing close cooperation, particularly to seal the border with Afghanistan. Both the US military and the American-backed regime in Kabul have called on Pakistan to take more vigorous military action to stop armed insurgents crossing into Afghanistan from the border areas.

Washington is concerned to shore up a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, where US troops and those of its puppet administration are increasingly coming under attack from armed opposition groups, including those of the ousted Taliban regime. The US is also pressing behind the scenes for a resolution of the ongoing conflict between Pakistan and India over Kashmir, which constantly threatens to destabilise a region where there are growing American strategic and economic interests.

Moreover, the Bush administration is keen to register

successes in its “global war on terrorism”. According to a report in the *Asia Times* last month, Washington has called on Pakistan to provide access to its national data base and the records of those involved in terrorist activities. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation has already been operating openly inside Pakistan, tracking down and detaining alleged Al Qaeda members.

Musharraf’s support for the anti-democratic measures demanded by the Bush administration has undermined the Pakistan dictator’s position. He seized power in 1999, accusing then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of caving into the US and India by withdrawing support for Kashmiri separatists who had taken control of the Kargil Heights.

But in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, Musharraf abruptly fell into line with Washington abandoning Pakistan’s support for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Since then he has acceded to US demands to outlaw groups that previously were hailed by the Pakistan military as Kashmiri “freedom fighters,” provoking opposition from Islamic fundamentalist groups on which he relied for support.

The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a coalition of six Islamic fundamental groups, made strong gains in elections held last year and now effectively controls the provincial administrations in Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province. The Musharraf-based government of Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali is reliant on the MMA for a parliamentary majority.

MMA leaders met in Karachi on November 17 and declared their opposition to the new bans. In defiance of the government, MMA leader Shah Ahemad Noorani declared that the banned Islamia Tehrik would remain part of the MMA. Several protests have taken place against the measures.

The Islamic fundamentalist groups have not only exploited Musharraf’s close collaboration with Washington but his government’s failure to alleviate the social crisis confronting the majority of the population. A survey published last month in the *Nation* revealed “utter dissatisfaction” with the military-backed regime and noted widespread concerns over the appalling state of transport, health, sewerage and other services.

Unable to satisfy any of these pressing social needs, Musharraf is tightening his grip on power. The

crackdown on the Islamic fundamentalist groups is a convenient pretext for trampling on the democratic rights of government opponents.



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