

Musharraf imposes former Citibank official as Pakistan's prime minister

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Pakistan's US-backed military strongman, president and armed forces chief Pervez Musharraf, has orchestrated the installation of Shaukat Aziz, a former top official at New York's Citibank, as the country's prime minister.

Aziz officially became prime minister as the result of a National Assembly vote Friday, August 27. But it was Musharraf who prevailed on Zafarullah Khan Jamali to resign as prime minister in late June, then designated Aziz as his successor, thereby presenting the country and even the military-sponsored parliamentary party, the Pakistan Muslim League Quaid-e-Azam or PML-Q, with a *fait accompli*.

The entire opposition boycotted last Friday's vote. After the Speaker of the Assembly refused to order the government to bring the prime ministerial candidate of the 15-party Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD)—jailed Member of Parliament (MP) Makhdoom Javed Hashmi—before the Assembly, opposition members rose in protest and shouted "Go Musharraf go" and "Fake prime minister unacceptable." A prominent ARD leader, Hashmi has been in jail since last fall and in April was sentenced to 23 years in prison on trumped-up charges of sedition and inciting mutiny. The Speaker had allowed Hashmi to be nominated, but apparently buckled to pressure from the army, which feared his appearance before the assembly would overshadow Aziz's election and further reveal it to be a charade.

The Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), a six-party alliance of Islamic parties, joined the ARD in boycotting the vote and walking out of the assembly.

Musharraf forced the resignation of Jamali, who had served as prime minister since the military stage-managed elections in October 2002, after he failed to support the general's claim that he can legally remain both president and armed forces chief beyond the end of 2004. Late last year, the MMA broke ranks with the ARD and helped Jamali secure parliamentary endorsement of a package of constitutional changes that greatly enhance Musharraf's powers as president, extend his term in office to 2007, and give the military, through the creation of a National Security Council, a pivotal role in deciding government policy. In exchange, the MMA was given a pledge—in the form of a rambling and technically worded amendment—that by the end of 2004 Musharraf would give up his post as military commander.

To replace Jamali as prime minister, Aziz had to acquire a seat in the National Assembly. This was achieved when Aziz was declared elected in two by-elections held August 18. The opposition claims that the by-election results were marred by fraud and intimidation. Three opposition workers were killed the day before the vote.

A Citibank employee for 30 years, Aziz was one of its vice-presidents when Musharraf persuaded him to return to Pakistan, shortly after seizing power in October 1999. During his almost five years as finance minister, Aziz pursued the policy prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund, slashing government spending and pressing forward with privatization and deregulation. For this he was lauded by the international business press

and Washington.

At a meeting August 9 at which the president of the Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce & Industry assured Aziz of the support of business, the soon-to-be prime minister declared that "the first phase" of bank privatization had been "completed successfully and the government is now focussing on the privatization of the Industrial Development Bank of Pakistan."

Pointing to last year's 6 percent-plus growth rate, Aziz has claimed that Pakistan's economy is in flight. Certainly Pakistan's foreign reserves, buoyed by post-9/11 US aid and a surge in remittances from foreign nationals, are much improved from 1999. Then the Clinton administration feared Pakistan was cascading into bankruptcy. But the more perceptive commentators in the Pakistani press have noted the parallels between Aziz's claims and those of India's Bharatiya Janata Party led-government, which suffered a stunning electoral defeat last May as a result of popular anger at the economic insecurity and social polarization produced by capitalist globalization.

In his maiden speech as prime minister, Aziz vowed to continue the neo-liberal market "reforms" even while conceding they have not improved the lot of Pakistan's toilers. "Our ... biggest challenge," said Aziz, "is to take the fruits of economic progress to grassroots by maintaining the direction we have set in the past five years."

While paying lip service to the need for greater attention to the "distribution" of economic growth, Aziz affirmed that his government's first priority will be law and order, "especially terrorism." These, he added, can no longer be controlled through "traditional methods"—a phrase that can have only a chilling ring in a country where the police and armed forces are notorious for human rights abuse. Aziz said law-enforcement agencies will be reorganized to "streamline their capabilities."

Since the beginning of 2004, Pakistani security forces has been mounting an "anti-terrorist" offensive, sending troops into tribal regions that have historically enjoyed great autonomy and conducting raids and sweeps in major population centers.

This offensive is due in part to heavy pressure from the US. The Pakistani press is full of commentary on the Bush administration's desire and need for an "October surprise" in the form of the capture of top al-Qaeda leaders, many of whom are reputed to be hiding in Pakistan. There is also concern in Washington about Pakistan's border regions serving as the staging ground for attacks aimed at disrupting Afghanistan's October presidential election, which is being organized so as to give the US-installed regime in Kabul greater international and popular legitimacy.

But there is no question that Musharraf and the Pakistani military—which thanks to its involvement in the Afghan civil war has a long and close association with various armed Islamic extremist groups—were rattled by the two highly sophisticated assassination attempts mounted against the general/president last December.

The opposition—both the ARD, which includes the supporters of Benazir

Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and of deposed PML Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and the MMA—and international human rights groups have strongly criticized the Pakistan military's "war on terrorism," which has involved close coordination with the US military, the CIA and FBI. They charge that the campaign in the tribal areas that border Afghanistan has involved indiscriminate attacks leading to heavy civilian casualties, arbitrary detentions, unexplained deaths and disappearances, and the use of colonial-style collective punishments and blockades of food and other vital supplies.

Within the Pakistani elite there are mounting concerns that Musharraf's "anti-terrorist" campaign and Islamabad's complicity in supporting an Afghan government that is widely seen as inimical to the interests of the Pashtun—the largest ethnic group in both Afghanistan and Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province—are further exacerbating national-ethnic tensions within Pakistan and fuelling separatist sentiment. In recent months there has been a revival of nationalist agitation in the western province of Baluchistan. On the day the National Assembly held its vote for prime minister, a coalition of Baluchi nationalist parties mounted a general strike to protest the military operations in the province and government plans to build three new military bases there.

The elevation of Aziz—a "technocrat" with no popular following—to the post of prime minister represents a further consolidation of power in Musharraf's hands. It is also meant to please Washington, by giving the day-to-day administration of government over to someone who is known to be strongly pro-US and has longstanding professional and personal ties to Wall Street.

The Musharraf regime has been touted by the Bush administration as a key US ally ever since Islamabad's September 2001 decision to withdraw patronage from the Taliban regime and assist the US in the conquest of Afghanistan. While Washington has repeatedly pressed Musharraf to do more to support the "war on terrorism," it has had nothing but praise for the general's authoritarian rule over the Pakistani people, lauding the various devices, including sham elections, that the dictator has used to try to give his regime a democratic façade. True to form, the US State Department was quick to hail Aziz's election as prime minister.

Musharraf's promotion of Aziz and manifest reluctance to part with the post of military chief attest to the crisis and fragility of his regime. As *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman noted this week, US foreign policy analysts are increasingly preoccupied by the possibility that the Musharraf regime could unravel.

While Washington has provided some additional aid money to Pakistan, much of it for the military, the geo-political and economic policies it has imposed on Islamabad are deeply unpopular and socially incendiary—facilitating the US's domination of Central Asia and the Middle East and the exploitation of Pakistan's resources and labor force by international capital.

The people of Pakistan have every reason to resent and oppose US imperialist domination. Over the past five decades, the US has repeatedly supported and sustained military dictatorships in Pakistan in pursuit of its predatory great power objectives. Pakistan's US-directed involvement in the Afghan civil war transformed Washington into the bulwark of the dictatorship of General Zia, encouraged the growth of Islamic extremism and sectarian religious violence, and spawned a corrosive guns and drugs culture in much of the country.

The Bush administration had hopes Islamabad would be able to bolster the US occupation of Iraq. To this end, the US prevailed on the United Nations to appoint Pakistani diplomat Jehangir Ashraf Qazi as the UN Secretary General's special representative to Iraq. But given the enormous public opposition to the US invasion of Iraq, let alone any Pakistani participation in the occupation, the Musharraf regime has thus far not dared try to deploy troops to Baghdad.

Moreover, Musharraf must contend not only with mounting popular

opposition, but also numerous conflicts within the elite over its strategic orientation. Many of the policy changes that Musharraf has been forced to make under US pressure—the repudiation of the Taliban, the curtailment of Pakistani support for the anti-Indian agitation in Kashmir, the opening of peace talks with India, and the halt to covert trading in nuclear weapons technology—cut across long-term strategic initiatives of the Pakistan ruling class.

It is well-known that there is strong support for Islamic political extremism within the Pakistani state apparatus. General Zia made Islamism the ideology of his regime and patronized the forces now grouped in the MMA as a counterweight to the working class and liberal bourgeois opposition, and encouraged the spread of the madrassa network as a means of social control. Meanwhile, the Pakistani secret police, the Inter-Service Intelligence Agency, served as the conduit for billions of dollars in assistance to the mujahideen in Afghanistan. Then, in the 1990s, the ISI used them and their Pakistani allies to marginalize the secular nationalists who initially were in the leadership of the Kashmir agitation.

Given the material interests and political imperatives bound up with its long patronage of a large assortment of Islamicist movements, from the traditional conservative religious parties through the Taliban, it is hardly surprising that the Musharraf regime finds itself pulled in myriad directions as it seeks to uphold Pakistan's strategic interests in Afghanistan and Kashmir, crush al-Qaeda, and tighten its control over the ulema and madrassa.

Although the MMA has sought to exploit the popular opposition to the US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq and the Pakistani military operations in NWFP and Baluchistan, it and the Musharraf regime remain in an uneasy, on-again, off-again alliance. In Baluchistan the MMA and the pro-Musharraf PML-Q are united in a coalition government. It was the MMA which last December provided the votes to ensure passage of the constitutional amendments that give Musharraf's authoritarian rule a democratic facade. In May the Speaker, no doubt acting at the military's urging, named the leader of the MMA, not the ARD, as leader of the Official Opposition, although the ARD has significantly more National Assembly seats. Last month, just days before the Interior Minister accused some in the MMA of having ties to al-Qaeda, a top leader of the PML-Q expressed regret that current circumstances had led the MMA to attack the government and said he is convinced they are natural allies.

Musharraf's relations with the various strands of Islamic political extremism underscore that he is involved in an increasingly risky high-wire act, as he tries to balance Washington's demands and the need to find bases of support within a socially polarized and fractured Pakistani society.



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