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With the backing of the United States, Britain and other western powers, Pakistan's military dictator-president, General Pervez Musharraf, has staged-managed events so he can claim that he is bowing to the "people's wishes" when he renounces a pledge to step down as head of Pakistan's armed forces.

As part of a deal to ensure parliamentary passage of a series of constitutional amendments that *ex post facto* sanctioned his regime's anti-democratic actions and further enhanced the military's role in determining government policy, Musharraf promised last December that he would step down as Pakistan's Chief of Armed Services (COAS) by the end of 2004. At the time, Musharraf's pledge was praised by western governments and much of the media as a step toward the return of "full" civilian rule and democracy.

But Musharraf has become increasingly apprehensive at any weakening of his hold over the military, the bulwark of his unpopular, pro-US regime. For months he and his aides have been suggesting that he could renege on last December's pledge.

Recently Pakistan's parliament—which was chosen in an election whose rules were rewritten to ensure a pro-Musharraf ministry—rammed through the "President to Hold Another Office Act 2004" over vehement protests from the opposition. Comprised of Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) loyal to former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and an alliance of Islamist parties, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal or MMA, the parliamentary opposition has condemned the bill—which sanctions "the present holder of the office of President" to "hold another office in the service of Pakistan"—as "illegal and unconstitutional."

When the bill came before the National Assembly October 14, the Deputy Speaker refused to allow debate, provoking an opposition walkout. Similarly, in the upper house of Pakistan's parliament, Senators from the governing pro-military party, the Pakistan

Muslim League-Q, adopted the bill after the opposition had walked out in protest.

The bill will come into effect once Musharraf, in his guise as president, signs it into law. According to Pakistani press reports, he likely will do so shortly after Ramadan concludes this coming Sunday.

The Islamic fundamentalist MMA has been especially vociferous in criticizing the bill. This is an attempt to cover up its own role in helping Musharraf strengthen his hand by securing parliamentary passage of the Legal Framework Order (LFO)—a package of constitutional amendments that gave legal blessing to his 1999 coup and subsequent disbanding of parliament, extended his presidential term to 2007, and created a new National Security Council that gives the military a permanent and decisive say in formulating government policy. Last December the MMA broke ranks with the other opposition parties to vote for the LFO. It justified its support for Musharraf with the claim that in return for its pro-LFO vote it had obtained the General-President's pledge that he would forsake his post as head of Pakistan's armed services no later than December 31, 2004.

Musharraf has said that were he to give up his command of the military, it could undermine his authority in pressing forward with the "war on terrorism" and peace negotiations with India.

The truth is that the Musharraf regime is increasingly beleaguered. Its pursuit of IMF-style economic restructuring and support for the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have intensified the opposition from the working class and oppressed masses.

At the same time, the major shifts in geo-political and internal strategy that Musharraf has made under intense US pressure have caused serious rifts within the Pakistani elite and placed the military increasingly in conflict with its traditional allies in the Islamist parties and Muslim clergy.

First, Islamabad was forced to repudiate its ties to the

Taliban regime. Then, because the Bush administration views the Indo-Pakistani conflict as cutting across its attempts to forge a strategic partnership with India and the Kashmir insurgency as a breeding ground for Islamic terrorism, Washington pressed Musharraf to make peace overtures to New Delhi. However, the struggle against India has long served as the crux of the Pakistani's bourgeoisie's legitimizing nationalist ideology and as the military's main justification for claiming a leading role in the country's affairs. Fears of Islamic extremism have also caused Washington to press Musharraf to exert government control over the *madrasahs* and otherwise restrict the political influence of Islamic fundamentalists. Musharraf continues to cultivate many of these elements. The MMA remains in government in two of Pakistan's provinces, including Baluchistan, where it serves in a coalition with the pro-Musharraf PML (Q). But this balancing act is becoming increasingly difficult and precarious.

Not least among Musharraf's reasons for keeping his COAS post is his fear of dissent within Pakistan's security forces. It is widely acknowledged that two assassination attempts against Musharraf last December could not have been carried out without logistical support from elements within the military.

All sections of the parliamentary opposition have protested against the Pakistani armed forces' operations against alleged al-Qaeda operatives and Taliban fighters in tribal areas bordering on Afghanistan. The hunt for "terrorists" has taken the form of a colonial-style pacification campaign in South Waziristan, with troops carrying out house-to-house searches and imposing economic blockades on villages and entire tribes. Since the Pakistani military launched its offensive in South Waziristan last March some 400 people have reportedly been killed.

The Bush administration has repeatedly hailed the dictator Musharraf as a key ally in its war on terrorism, and given its blessing to his authoritarian rule. Earlier this year, Washington rewarded Pakistan with the designation of "major non-NATO ally." It is thus not in the least surprising that the Bush administration has given its support to Musharraf's latest anti-democratic power-grab. The US State Department said Musharraf's reneging on his pledge to give up the post of head of Pakistan's armed forces would not affect

"progress towards" democracy. Declared State Department spokesman Richard Boucher, "Progress toward democracy in Pakistan doesn't rest solely on this step ... We continue to encourage progress, and we continue to encourage Pakistanis to look for ways to make progress."

Commonwealth Secretary General Donald McKinnon, who visited Pakistan on October 21, was even more explicit in his support. He declared that Musharraf's retaining control of the armed forces would be "democratic if parliament approves it." McKinnon flatly rejected any suggestion that the Commonwealth, which recently lifted the suspension placed on Pakistan after the 1999 military coup, might have to reconsider its evaluation that Pakistan was progressing "toward democracy."

Australian High Commissioner to Pakistan Zorica McCarthy seconded McKinnon's remarks, saying "We Australians have much regard for President Musharraf and his policy against terrorism threats not only in Pakistan but also in other countries."



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