

Pakistan: US-backed military regime mounts new wave of repression

Vilani Peiris
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Scores, possibly hundreds, of activists of Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) remain in detention after a massive crackdown launched last month by the US-backed military regime of Pervez Musharraf.

Some of the PPP detainees are facing charges under Section 7-A of Pakistan's Anti-Terrorism Act. Yet their only "crime" was to seek to organize peaceful anti-government protests.

In a statement issued last Wednesday, PPP Senator Mian Raza Rabbani and Naheed Khan, the political secretary of PPP Life Chairperson Benazir Bhutto, accused the government of trying to stifle the opposition with a view to rigging local body elections planned for this summer.

The attack on the PPP is part of a wider campaign of repression. The speaker of the National Assembly, the lower house of Pakistan's parliament, warned this week that legislators who criticize Musharraf for serving as both president and chief of Pakistan's armed services could be barred from participating in the assembly. On May 3 police attacked journalists who were marking World Press Freedom Day with a demonstration outside the prime minister's official residence. According to a report in the *Dawn*, the police attack all but turned "press freedom day into a police freedom day" and "was probably the roughest-ever physical handling of the press in Islamabad."

A demonstration mounted by human rights activists May 14 to draw attention to the lack of women's rights in Pakistan and the government's failure to stand up to the religious right's attempt to impose rigid sexual segregation was broken up by police, with several dozen protesters manhandled and arrested. Recently the Punjab provincial government responded to a mob attack, led by an Islamic fundamentalist legislator, on a men's and women's marathon by proscribing further mixed sports events.

"Forcibly preventing participation in public events by women can only act to encourage extremism, and send a message to orthodox elements that their actions are condoned by the state," declared the non-governmental Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, in a statement

deploring the police attack on the May 14 protest.

Following a longstanding practice of the Pakistani military, the Musharraf regime has actively promoted the Islamic fundamentalist right as a bulwark against the working class and the traditional ruling class parties, most notably Bhutto's PPP and the section of the Pakistan Muslim League that has remained loyal to the elected prime minister whom Musharraf deposed, Nawaz Sharif.

The Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), an alliance of six Islamic parties which has been able to garner increased support by appealing to popular opposition to the US occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, has repeatedly come to the aid of Musharraf, most infamously in December 2003, when it helped secure parliament's adoption of a series of constitutional amendments that legitimized Musharraf's 1999 coup and his remaining president, with significantly augmented powers, until 2007.

Many of the PPP activists were detained a month ago, when Pakistani security forces took tens of thousands of PPP members and leaders into custody so as to prevent an April 16 rally to welcome Bhutto's husband, Asif Zardari, on his return to the country. Others were arrested May 4, when the police mounted a second wave of arrests to prevent the PPP from mounting a march the next day from the Lahore High Court to the Punjab governor's house.

The state repression against the PPP points to the authoritarian character of the Musharraf regime—a regime the Bush administration has repeatedly praised for its contributions to the war on terrorism and commitment to building democracy. As the Asian director of Human Rights Watch said in an April 20 statement, "Democracies don't use force to prevent peaceful gatherings."

The mass arrests also underscore the increasing nervousness of Musharraf and the civilian government that he and the Pakistani military have constructed from defectors from the PPP, the Muslim League of Nawaz Sharif, and other members of the country's business and political elite.

Musharraf is rightly seen by broad sections of the

Pakistani people as a pliant ally of the Bush administration in its policy of neo-colonial aggression in the Middle East and Central Asia. The policy reversals Musharraf has been compelled to make by Washington, including withdrawing support for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and opening peace talks with India, have also rankled much of the country's elite, because they cut across their traditional interests and ambitions.

Musharraf and his prime minister, former Citibank official Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, routinely boast that Pakistan's economy is taking off. But it is widely conceded in the press that the privatization and retrenchment policies of the regime have resulted in growing poverty and social inequality and that these have been compounded in recent months by a spurt in inflation, which is currently running at an annual rate of more than 10 percent.

In an attempt to shore up his rule, Musharraf has for months been conducting secret negotiations with the PPP leadership. Bhutto and Zardari have reputedly offered to endorse the general remaining president for two more years in exchange for his agreeing to the staging of new elections this year, rather than in 2007.

To facilitate a reconciliation, the authorities arranged for Zardari, who faces a number of corruption and other criminal charges, to be released last November on bail after eight years in jail. Then they permitted him to leave the country to visit his family and consult with Bhutto, who, for fear of herself being hauled before the Pakistani courts on corruption charges, has taken up residence in Dubai.

But even if the PPP leadership has bent over backwards to demonstrate its readiness to deal with Musharraf and repeatedly affirmed that the military is the bulwark of the Pakistani state, so isolated is the regime that it dare not allow the PPP to make any public display of its popular support.

To thwart the April 16 PPP welcome rally for Zardari, the Punjab provincial government, which is led by the pro-Musharraf Pakistan Muslim League Quaid-e-Azam (PML-Q), invoked Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code. Designed by the British colonial authorities, Section 144 makes gathering of four or more persons illegal.

Beginning on April 14, large numbers of PPP leaders and party workers were taken into police custody. More than 25,000 police and paramilitary forces were mobilized in Lahore, the capital of the Punjab and the country's second largest city, to detain PPP activists. Travel in much of the country was disrupted, as all trains to Lahore were cancelled, flights diverted and the Punjab's borders temporarily sealed.

The government admits that 5,000 people were taken into custody, including many PPP National Assembly members and provincial legislators. Other accounts put the number of arrests in the tens of thousands. Zardari, who was himself

briefly taken into custody on his arrival at Lahore airport, told the BBC that as many as 70,000 PPP members had been detained and that a significant number were physically abused. PPP provincial assemblywoman Azma Bokhari was so badly roughed up she had to be admitted to hospital.

The legislators and other top PPP leaders were released in the days immediately after April 16. But this has not put an end to the incarceration and harassment of PPP supporters.

The government crackdown has been condemned by the entire opposition, including the MMA. In a rare show of anti-government unity, all opposition legislators walked out of the Senate April 22 to protest the attack on the PPP.

The PPP leadership has contrasted the repression of its welcome rally for Zardari with the hands-off approach the government took to a recent "million man" series of rallies the MMA held to demand that Musharraf give up at least one of his two key state posts.

While there is no doubt that the government has frequently given a boost to the MMA, the PPP is no more capable than the Islamic right of mounting a consistent and genuine popular struggle against the Musharraf regime. The PPP looks to the military to defend the property and privileges of the ruling elite against Pakistan's toiling masses and appeals to the US and other imperialist powers for support in loosening the military's grip on political power.

If Bhutto and Zardari have not come to a deal with Musharraf, it is because the general fears parting with any real measure of power and because his plans to cut a deal with the PPP have triggered a quasi-revolt in the ranks of his own "court" party, the pro-military PML (Q).

Speaking two weeks after the beginning of the anti-PPP crackdown, Zardari tried to put some distance between himself and the military regime, saying the PPP had no interest in gaining power through the "backdoor." But his comments pointed to the true rule of the PPP as a party that uses populist appeals to garner mass support, but speaks for a section of the Pakistani bourgeoisie. According to the *Dawn*, the PPP leader "said the 'establishment people' were in a mess and the PPP wanted to open for them a door out of this situation."



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