

Pakistani protests over anti-Muslim cartoons threaten Musharraf's rule

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Ongoing protests in Pakistan against the provocative Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed have increasingly been directed against the ruling regime and the US, as well as European countries where the images have been published. The demonstrations not only complicate US President George Bush's planned visit to Islamabad next month, but also threaten the position of Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

The protests in major Pakistani cities erupted after February 6 as part of the outrage among Muslims internationally. Initially Musharraf condemned the cartoons and permitted street protests, hoping that the anger would subside. However, as the rallies continued to grow substantially last week Musharraf unleashed a vicious police crackdown.

On February 14, protesters in Lahore ransacked a McDonald's franchise and set fire to KFC outlets and an office of the Norwegian mobile phone company Telenor. They also burned an effigy of Musharraf. The police broke up the crowds with batons, tear gas and by firing shots, purportedly into the air. Two people were killed in the clashes.

The following day a huge crowd of 70,000 gathered in Peshawar, capital of the North Western Frontier Province (NWFP). Again the protesters turned on Western businesses. Police fired tear gas then live bullets to break up a crowd attacking a KFC outlet. Two people were killed.

Anti-American sentiment is widespread among villagers along the Afghanistan border in North Western Frontier Province. Tribal Pashtuns have been subjected to Pakistani military operations and US air attack aimed at stamping out support for fighters opposed to the US occupation of Afghanistan.

On February 16 about 40,000 people marched along a three-kilometre route in Karachi to protest against the

cartoons. Demonstrators burned Danish flags and effigies of the Danish prime minister and chanted "God's curse be on those who insulted the prophet." Some 5,000 police and para-military troops were deployed.

Last Sunday, the government banned a planned rally in Islamabad and sealed off the city centre. More than 6,000 police and paramilitary troops blocked the entry points and used tear gas and rubber bullets to break up groups of protesters. After four hours of street battles, nearly a thousand demonstrators gathered at Aabpara Chowk for a meeting. Among the slogans chanted, one pointedly referring to Musharraf declared "Any friend of America is a traitor".

The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), an alliance of six Islamic fundamentalist parties, called the rally. Its leader Qazi Hussain Ahmed was put on house arrest in Lahore to prevent him from attending. The MMA accused the government of detaining 3,463 of its members to prevent the protest.

MMA parliamentarians, including opposition leader Maulana Fazlur Rehman, were allowed to march to the meeting place. However, as Rehman was talking to reporters, police suddenly fired tear gas provoking clashes between police and demonstrators. About 50 people, including 15 policemen, were injured in Sunday's clashes in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. Another 300 were arrested.

The MMA has called for further rallies later this month and early next month. March 3, which coincides with Bush's visit to Islamabad, has been designated as a day of protest. MMA leader Qazi Hussain Ahmed declared that his party is seeking to topple the Musharraf regime by March 23. For all its rhetoric, however, the MMA is far more likely to exploit the anger over the cartoons to reach a new accommodation

with Musharraf—as it has in the past.

Washington has declared that Bush's visit will go ahead as planned, provoking fears in Pakistani ruling circles of a bloody showdown between the regime and demonstrators. When the Pakistani national assembly met on Monday, Prime Minister Shaukat Azize warned that the government would not allow any violation of "law and order". A number of MPs urged the MMA to postpone the rally. One parliamentarian told the media: "I shiver to think of what will happen on that day".

Musharraf is desperate to defuse the growing crisis. On February 15, he and visiting Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai appealed to Western governments to condemn the drawings. Musharraf recalled the Pakistani ambassador to Denmark last week. Pakistan is also seeking the intervention of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to call on the UN and EU to make a formal condemnation of the cartoons.

An editorial in *News* on February 19 made a rather frantic appeal to people not to blame Musharraf and not to take part in the banned march in Islamabad that day. "Why march on Islamabad, though? What does the Pakistani government have to do with this thing? And it isn't that Pakistan didn't protest against the offensive cartoons. This march becomes all the more senseless after Pakistan's recall of its ambassador from Denmark."

Several commentators have pointed out that the discontent extends beyond the base of the MMA and other opposition parties and is not limited to the issue of the cartoons. For some time, there has been mounting anger in Pakistan over Musharraf's close ties with the Bush administration and its backing for the US invasion of Afghanistan as well as resentment over deteriorating social conditions.

Syed Saleem Shahzad commented in *Asia Times* on February 17: "Behind the present demonstrations is an underlying trend that has not been widely reported. Such protests have traditionally been the bread and butter of the religious-political parties to stir up their workers as well as motivate the masses. However, this week, for the first time, the common masses took to the streets on their own accord."

Shahzad noted that the protest in Islamabad on February 14 "was undertaken by students from all over the capital" even though it was "not called by any political student union". Describing a rally on the same

day in Lahore, he wrote: "From the morning the whole city of Lahore was closed and many thousands of people, without party flags, took to the streets."

An editorial in the *Nation* entitled "Writing on the wall" reflected concerns in ruling circles that the protests were getting out of the MMA's control. "Many MMA leaders concede that the protests have gone beyond condemning the blasphemous sketches ... While the government is looking for scapegoats, it is being increasingly realised that there was a spontaneous outburst of pent-up resentment caused by numerous factors, the most important being economic and political."

Explicitly pointing to underlying social tensions, the newspaper wrote: "This supports the view, held by many, that the official development strategy has not only failed to achieve a trickle down effect, but has instead led to concentration of wealth in relatively few hands, widening of the rich-poor gap as never seen before. The government's policies have also promoted exhibitionist lifestyles among the elite. While high unemployment continues, high inflation has made the dispossessed desperate."

The *Nation* warned Musharaff that his autocratic rule was leading to a political explosion. Without "democratic ways" to "ventilate grievances", it stated, "mob violence" was taking place. The editorial urged the government "to take note of this dangerous trend" and to allow opposition parties to play a greater role by holding elections next year. Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party, Nawaz Shariff's Pakistani Muslim League and the Muttihida Quam Movement have all taken part in the protests.

There are clearly fears in Pakistani ruling circles that despite the efforts of the MMA and other opposition parties the continuing protests will spiral out of control.



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