

Pakistan's US-backed dictator to stage bogus presidential election

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General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's US-backed military strongman, has signaled that he will orchestrate a bogus presidential election next year in a bid to cling onto power until 2012.

Musharraf, who overthrew an elected government in 1999, has repeatedly sought to counter criticism of his authoritarian regime by claiming that he will stand for "re-election" as president in 2007.

Given Musharraf's record, there was every reason to doubt he would ever allow an election that could in any sense be considered free and fair. True to form, the general-president, his advisors, and leaders of the pro-military Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam) have let it be known that they intend to ensure Musharraf remains president through a brazenly undemocratic re-interpretation of the country's constitution.

Pakistan's president is chosen by an electoral college made up of the members of the federal and provincial legislatures. When Musharraf spoke of contesting a presidential election next year, it was thus understood that he would seek a presidential mandate from the legislatures that are to be elected for a fresh 5 year-term in the fall of 2007.

But Musharraf and other spokesmen for his regime have said that the Chief of Pakistan's Armed Services has the constitutional right to, and most likely will, ask the current legislatures to constitute an electoral college and elect him to a 5-year presidential term in September-October 2007.

Musharraf first endorsed this novel interpretation of the constitution in a May 14 television interview. "The existing assemblies," declared the general-president, "could elect the president for a second term instead of the new assemblies."

His statement was clearly meant as an answer to the Charter of Democracy issued five days before by the two main opposition leaders, Benazir Bhutto, president for life of the Pakistan People's Party, and Nawaz Sharif, whose supporters are organized in the Muslim League (Nawaz). Longtime bitter rivals, Bhutto and Sharif have vowed to return to Pakistan to jointly contest the 2007 elections.

Plainly, Musharraf fears that the military and his political cronies may not be able to successfully manipulate the results of the 2007 legislative elections. For this reason, he plans to have himself named Pakistan's president until 2012 by legislatures chosen, not in 2007, but in 2002. These legislatures were chosen, it should be added, through elections that were stage-managed by the military and government through the placing of numerous restrictions on the campaigns of the principal opposition parties, vote-buying, and ballot-rigging.

Musharraf's plans to stage a phony presidential election, like his refusal to give up his post as the head of Pakistan's armed forces,

attest to the vulnerability of his regime.

From without Pakistan is being squeezed by Washington's demands for help in pursuing its predatory ambitions in South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East, as well as by the rise of long-time rival India. Domestically, the Musharraf regimes faces opposition both from large swathes of the elite and from Pakistan's toilers, whose living standards have been ravaged by the government's neo-liberal economic reform program.

Over the past five years, Musharraf has gone to extraordinary lengths to accommodate Washington's demands, despite massive popular opposition to the Bush administration and US imperialism and growing unease within the Pakistani elite over the US's courting of India and apparent indifference to Pakistan's geo-political concerns and interests.

To please Washington, Musharraf's regime broke ties with the Taliban government in Kabul and provided logistical support to the US conquest of Afghanistan, has ratcheted back Pakistan's support for the insurgency in Indian-held Kashmir and begun peace talks with India, and has sought to rein in the Islamic fundamentalist parties, which traditionally have worked closely with the military and benefited from its patronage.

Particularly unnerving for the Pakistani elite is the recent Indo-US nuclear accord. Under this accord, Washington has agreed to spearhead a change in the world nuclear regulatory regime so that India can obtain nuclear fuel and advanced civilian nuclear technology, although India, like Pakistan, has developed nuclear weapons in defiance of the US-sponsored Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

This change will allow India to devote more resources to its nuclear weapons program, while rapidly expanding its civilian nuclear power industry so as to reduce its dependence on oil and natural gas imports. Pakistan thus faces the prospect of an ever-widening military and economic gap with India. Moreover, the Bush administration has touted the nuclear accord as crucial to cementing a much wider Indo-US strategic partnership—a partnership that is to include dramatically increased economic, military, and geopolitical collaboration and that the Bush administration sees as going a long way towards realizing its aim of transforming India into a geo-political counterweight to China.

In an attempt to mollify Islamabad, the Bush administration last year named Pakistan a major non-NATO ally and in March offered Pakistan a "strategic partnership." But Washington has made it abundantly clear that there is no chance of it striking a nuclear accord with Pakistan and, while it has promised to otherwise assist Pakistan in overcoming a growing energy crisis, it is intent on scuttling Islamabad's plans to build a natural gas pipeline to Iran.

Musharraf has responded to the ever-broadening Indo-US partnership by seeking even closer ties with Pakistan's neighbor and longstanding ally China. Earlier this month he attended, as an observer, the annual meeting of the Chinese- and Russian-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

Musharraf's China gambit enjoys widespread support within the Pakistani elite. Writing in the *Dawn*, a former diplomat declared, "Many of us have been advocating concerted efforts to impart greater substance and purpose to our relations with China, especially in view of developments in the region. ... Maximizing options means increasing room to maneuver, which is what we badly need. The US is the world's only superpower and Pakistan is right to maintain its current relations with it, but this is only a tactical arrangement. Pakistan's strategic friend and ally has been and will remain China."

But in so far as Pakistan pursues such a strategy, it risks riling Washington, which increasingly sees world affairs through the prism of a long-term struggle against China for dominance in Asia.

Domestically the Musharraf regime is no less buffeted by crisis. Despite the mobilization of more than 80,000 troops, the government has failed in its two year campaign to assert governmental control over the South Waziristan Agency, where remnants of the Taliban and al-Qaeda have found refuge among tribal groups. And resource-rich Baluchistan has been convulsed by a nationalist insurgency for the past year-and-a-half.

While the government claims Pakistan has achieved high rates of growth in the past two years and that this is proof of the correctness of its program of privatization and deregulation, there is increasing concern in the elite over the political ramifications of growing economic insecurity and social inequality.

To the extent that Musharraf has survived politically, it is because the bourgeois opposition fears that a challenge to his government could rapidly escape their control and risks splitting the military—the bulwark of the Pakistani state and guardian of the opposition's own privileged social position.

For several years Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party and the Muslim League (Nawaz), which are united in an a loose opposition coalition called the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD), and the alliance of Islamic fundamentalist parties, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) have been threatening, sometimes separately and sometimes together, to launch a mass movement against the Musharraf regime. But these threats have thus far proven empty.

Unwilling to launch a popular struggle against Musharraf, the PPP and Sharif's ML (N) have focused their efforts on seeking to woo Washington and the European Union, arguing that they could be a better guarantor of imperialist interests than Musharraf.

The various opposition groupings have also engaged in behind-the-scenes negotiations with the government, exploring the possibility of making a deal with Musharraf at the expense of their rivals.

The MMA, which benefited from backroom government support in the 2002 legislative elections, later cut a deal with Musharraf to enable the passing of a series of constitutional amendments aimed at providing legitimacy to the 1999 coup and Musharraf's expansion of the powers of the president.

In response to Musharraf's threat to steal the 2007 presidential elections, the three major opposition groupings—the PPP, ML (N) and MMA—have announced their intention to jointly mount a "decisive movement" to force an end to military rule, but no time-frame has been announced for the launching of this movement. There is no reason to believe that they will make good on this threat any more

than their previous ones, especially in the absence of any encouragement from Washington.

During his March visit to Pakistan, President George Bush delivered what was widely interpreted as a major diplomatic reprimand to Musharraf. This included issuing a call for free and fair elections in 2007, thus implying that the 2002 elections, which Washington had previously lauded as a step toward democracy, were tainted.

But US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had nothing, at least publicly, but praise for Musharraf and his regime during a trip to Islamabad this week.

For weeks, the US installed regime in Kabul and Islamabad have been involved in a very public spat, with Kabul criticizing Pakistan for not doing enough to eliminate support for the Taliban insurgency and Pakistan suggesting Afghanistan has been encouraging the nationalist insurgency in Baluchistan.

Rice refused to be drawn into this controversy. Following talks with Musharraf on Tuesday, she told a press conference, "Pakistan is a friend of the United States and a fierce fighter in the war on terrorism. Afghanistan also is a friend of the United States and a fierce fighter in the war on terror. We are going to emphasize what we have in common."

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri announced at the same press conference that Pakistan will be deploying an additional ten thousand troops to police its border with Afghanistan.

When asked if the US believes there can be a genuine election in Pakistan "if General Musharraf retains his military uniform and first gets reelected by the sitting assembly," Rice failed to criticize the Pakistani general-president or suggest that there was anything untoward in his plan to stage a bogus presidential election.

Instead she incorporated a reference to Musharraf's purported program of "enlightened moderation" into her answer and repeated as a good coin the claims of Musharraf and his government that they are moving Pakistan toward full democracy.

In other words, if Musharraf proves pliant to US interests, Washington stands ready to endorse his latest undemocratic power grab.



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