

Pakistan: Will Bhutto's PPP come to Musharraf's rescue?

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Pakistan People's Party (PPP) "Life Chairperson" Benazir Bhutto confirmed last week that she has been negotiating with the embattled, military regime of General Pervez Musharraf.

Bhutto, who has long lived outside Pakistan for fear of being prosecuted by the Musharraf regime for corruption, told the Dubai-based GEO television network that she has been talking with government emissaries. But she denied that a deal with the US-backed dictator is imminent.

"There are contacts, but so far I have not seen any implementable agreement," she said.

"The contacts," added Bhutto, "were there since 2002, and it's no secret. We are dealing with issues as we want a reformist agenda. If something happens I will tell you, but I've been hearing reports of a deal for the last seven years."

Bhutto said that Musharraf must stop violating the country's constitution by serving simultaneously as president and Chief of Pakistan's Armed Services (COAS), but didn't rule out allying with Musharraf if he were to give up his military post. Asked if she would be prepared to endorse the bid of Musharraf—who seized power in a coup in 1999 and has presided over an authoritarian, anti-working class regime—for a further 5 year-term as president if he forsakes his COAS post, Bhutto said coyly, "Only my party can take this decision."

In a move that was widely interpreted in the Pakistani press as a goodwill gesture toward Bhutto, the Pakistan government recently announced that it has disbanded the section of the National Accountability Bureau that was investigating corruption allegations against Bhutto and her husband, Asif Ali Zardari.

A hallmark of the Musharraf regime has been the manipulation of corruption cases against Pakistan's political establishment, especially politicians associated with the country's traditional ruling parties, the PPP and the Muslim League (N) of deposed prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

Contacts between Bhutto's PPP, a bourgeois party that postures as a proponent of democratic and egalitarian reform, and the Musharraf regime appear to have increased significantly since an attempt by the military strongman to pave the way for staging his re-election went badly awry.

On March 9, Musharraf accused the chief justice of Pakistan's supreme court, Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry, of "misconduct and misuse of authority," suspended him from his judicial functions, and ordered the country's judicial council to investigate the corruption allegations.

Chaudhury had long acted as a piant hand-raiser for the military regime. But since becoming head of the Supreme Court, he has authored a number of decisions that cut across the government's agenda, including declaring the government's deal to privatize the Pakistan Steel Mills unconstitutional. These judgments clearly raised doubts in Musharraf's mind as to whether Chaudhury would rubber-stamp his attempt to make an end-run round the constitution by having the legislators chosen in the military-manipulated polls of 2002 re-elect him as president till 2012.

Musharraf's flagrant attempt to manipulate the judiciary and 2007 elections provoked an outcry from Pakistan's legal profession and

sections of the press—an outcry that the opposition parties could not ignore.

Last Friday, for the fourth time since his suspension, Chief Justice Chaudhury appeared before the country's Supreme Judicial Council and for the fourth time there were large protests, despite the arrest of scores of political activists in the 24 hours prior to Chaudhury's appearance. According to a report in the *Dawn*, one of the placards at last Friday's protest read, "Reduce the poor's burden, reduce army by 80 per cent," and another read "India is a threat to Pakistan is a misconception. Poverty and unemployment are more serious threats to the country."

These placards notwithstanding, the bourgeois opposition to Musharraf—the PPP, Nawaz Sharif's ML (N), and the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), an alliance of rightwing Islamic parties—have not sought to mobilize Pakistan's toiling masses against the military regime by linking the sacking of Chaudhury and Musharraf's attempt to rig his re-election to the government's support for Bush's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the government's neo-liberal economic policies.

Nevertheless, the agitation over the government's brazen attempt to manipulate the judiciary and the impending elections has become a focal point for both popular and elite opposition to the eight year-old military regime and under conditions where Musharraf is enveloped by a series of crises.

The majority of Pakistanis are hostile to the US's wars of aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan, to say nothing of the Bush administration's plans for a military strike against Iran. Yet Musharraf is facing mounting pressure from Washington to do more to root out Taliban and al-Qaeda insurgents who have found refuge in tribal areas bordering Afghanistan.

In an interview with CBS television this past weekend, Musharraf angrily dismissed a suggestion that the US military join Pakistan's armed forces in a joint operation in Pakistan's tribal belt. "The whole population of Pakistan will rise against" such an operation, affirmed Musharraf. Pakistan's military strongman added that his government is "being maligned by the West unfairly because of lack of understanding" of the political environment. He also took a snipe at the US-installed president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, saying he was "very angry" with Karzai for repeatedly asserting that Pakistan isn't doing enough to suppress anti-Afghan government insurgents.

In recent weeks the Pakistani government's authority has been challenged in the streets of the national capital, Islamabad, by Islamic seminarians and female religious students protesting the demolition of some illegally constructed mosques and agitating for the government to enforce strict Sharia religious law.

To what extent the government is deliberately encouraging this assertion of Islamicist power in the capital as a stratagem to give the PPP, the ML (N), the Bush administration, and western governments pause is a question hotly debated in the Pakistani press. Certainly there has been a marked contrast between the government's acquiescence before the Islamic protests and the harsh treatment security forces have meted out to

some of those protesting against Justice Chaudhury's suspension.

But whatever the its intentions, the government's failure to enforce its writ on the streets of Islamabad is a sign of grave crisis, as is the continuing anti-government insurgency in the western province of Baluchistan.

For years the bourgeois opposition parties have been promising the imminent launching of a "final struggle" against the unpopular Musharraf regime. Yet time and again each of the three major opposition groupings has found reason to postpone and delay the long-promised anti-government agitation. Behind this ambivalence and equivocation lies their recognition that the Bush administration remains solidly behind Musharraf.

Indeed, as the controversy over Chaudhury's suspension has grown, Washington has made repeated statements in support of Musharraf. Richard Boucher, the US Under-Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, declared earlier this month, "We want Pakistan to succeed as a democratic nation, as an open economy, as a moderate society. And that's the direction that President Musharraf has given his country, that's what he has pledged to do—he's pledged to have democratic elections. That's the direction we support. So ... we'll work with him."

Second and even more fundamentally, all the opposition parties fear that any serious struggle against Musharraf's regime could provide a point of entry for Pakistan's toilers into political struggle and risks destabilizing the military, the institution that acts as both the bulwark of the Pakistani state and of capitalist property.

Thirdly, the leaders of the various opposition parties fear that should they take the lead in opposing Musharraf, the general might quickly consummate a deal with their rivals, leaving them on the outs.

There are many serious impediments to Bhutto and Musharraf striking a power-sharing deal, under which Musharraf will retain the presidency and the PPP will be brought back into government. Musharraf's power comes from his control of the military and he is therefore loathe to make any arrangement under which he is forced to give up his uniform.

Also, the leaders of the pro-military PML (Q), who currently head the government, will bitterly resist any deal with the PPP, because it will perform strip them of most, if not all, of their official posts and patronage powers. But the PPP has twice before come to the rescue of the Pakistani bourgeoisie and military.

The PPP assumed the reins of power in December 1971, under conditions where a radicalized working class was demanding sweeping social reform and after the Pakistani elite's attempt to deny the Bengalis of East Pakistan equality within the Pakistani federation had ended in the secession of Bangladesh.

Again in the late 1980s after the Zia dictatorship crumbled, it was the PPP that took office and which, while mouthing populist phrases, implemented right-wing IMF-World Bank policies.

Benazir Bhutto, the daughter of PPP-founder Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, initially welcomed Musharraf's coup and has placed appeals to Washington, the EU and the Commonwealth—the very imperialist forces that have propped up Musharraf—at the center of her campaign to "restore democracy."

Bhutto has justified the PPP's reluctance to join the MMA in an anti-Musharraf campaign by pointing to the longstanding and continuing connections between the Islamicist right and the Pakistani military and by citing the MMA's reactionary positions on women, the rights of religious minorities, and numerous other social questions.

Unquestionably, the MMA's attitude to Musharraf is at least as ambivalent as that of the PPP. In December 2003, it helped Musharraf secure parliamentary passage of a package of constitutional amendments aimed at giving a fig-leaf of democratic legitimacy to his dictatorship. It remains in a coalition government with the military-created PML (Q) in Baluchistan.

But the PPP's opposition to uniting with MMA has nothing to do with a principled opposition to the Islamic right. Rather it is bound up with its hopes of regaining a share of power by winning Washington's favor and cutting a deal with Musharraf. The PPP is incapable of mounting a struggle for genuine democracy against Musharraf and the religious right, because of its hostility and fear of the masses and because it itself is steeped in Islamic communalism.

Bhutto's grandfather, the scion of a great landowning family that collaborated with British imperialism in ruling the Raj, was among the architects of the 1947 communal partition of South Asia. He played a leading role in the Muslim League's failed attempt to entice Hindu princes who feared the Indian National Congress' bourgeois-democratic reform program into fusing their princely-kingdoms into Pakistan. Ali Bhutto served in the pro-US dictatorship of Ayub Khan, then sought to exploit the growing popular anger against the military government by recasting himself as a democratic and socialist.

After assuming the reins of power, he spearheaded the post-1971 drive of the Pakistani elite to much more explicitly promote Pakistan as an Islamic state. He did so for two reasons: to shore up the Pakistani state and its ruling nationalist ideology after the trauma of 1971 and so as to pursue close relations with the reactionary, oil-rich Gulf States.

While Benazir Bhutto decries the MMA's regressive attitudes toward women, as Pakistan's prime minister she was quite willing to patronize the Taliban and Islamicist fundamentalist forces in Indian-held Kashmir so as to bolster Pakistan's in its decades-long conflict with India. That geopolitical and religious-communal conflict, it should be added, has served as the principal justification for the military's dominant position in Pakistani politics and society.

By aggressively courting Washington and voicing support for Bush's "war on terror," Bhutto has enabled the MMA to tap into the popular opposition to the US's wars of aggression in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Last but not least, a successful, progressive struggle against the Islamicist right is possible only the basis of a program that addresses the manifold social and economic grievances of Pakistan's toilers—the mounting poverty and economic insecurity, the semi-feudal land relations, etc. But the PPP, no less than the Musharraf regime, is committed to a pro-investor, anti-working class agenda.

The struggle against Musharraf and the Islamic right requires that the working class politically settle accounts with the bourgeois PPP and spearhead a movement of Pakistan's toilers. The aim of such a movement must be the creation of a workers and peasants government committed to establishing social equality and democracy by placing the country's basic economic levers under public ownership and fusing the struggle of the Pakistani masses with the worldwide struggle against capitalism and imperialism.



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