

Gunbattles in Karachi

Pakistani president seeks to drown mounting opposition in blood

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Karachi, a city of 10 million and Pakistan's commercial hub, was convulsed by gun-battles Saturday, as Pakistan's US-backed military strongman, President Pervez Musharraf, resorted to deadly violence in a bid to quash the growing popular challenge to his rule.

According to press reports, at least 36 people were killed and more than 140 injured when thugs allied with the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), a pro-Musharraf party, attacked crowds gathering to show support for the country's "suspended" Chief Justice, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry.

In March, Musharraf moved to have Chaudhry stripped of his post as head of Pakistan's Supreme Court on trumped-up corruption charges. Chaudhry, like the rest of Pakistan's top judges, has a long record of giving a judicial fig-leaf to Musharraf's anti-democratic and unconstitutional actions, including the 1999 coup in which he seized power. But Chaudhry recently issued a number of rulings, including striking down the privatization of Pakistan Steel Mills, that cut across the government's agenda and caused Musharraf to conclude he could not rely on Chaudhry to provide a judicial blessing for his stage-managed "re-election" as president later this fall.

On the evening of Friday, May 11, the MQM blockaded the main arteries into Karachi with trucks, buses, and containers. The next morning thousands of MQM activists armed with sticks roamed Karachi's streets warning lawyers, who had invited Chaudhry to address the Sindh High Court Bar Association, and opposition activists, who were intending to greet the suspended chief justice, to stay in their homes.

But with all the major opposition parties—including

the Pakistan People's Party, the Pakistan Muslim League, the Awami National Party and the six-member alliance of Islamic fundamentalist parties (the MMA)—endorsing the call to greet Chaudhry, thousands took to the streets in defiance of the MQM threats and a massive mobilization of security forces.

An AP reporter says he saw MQM supporters firing at crowds of protesters from buildings in Karachi's Golden Town district and some among the anti-Musharraf demonstrators firing back. A second major clash, including an exchange of gunfire and the setting ablaze of buses and motor vehicles, occurred at Malir Hal, where Musharraf opponents came face to face with those on the way to an MQM-counter rally.

Although the authorities had mobilized some 16,000 security personnel, they did nothing to stop the MQM attacks. Some newspapers are reporting that the security personnel were specifically ordered not to intervene. A low-ranking policeman told the *Daily Times*, "There were some orders and our weapons were taken from us. It was as if we were put here just to watch."

Over the past two months security forces have repeatedly roughed up journalists covering protests against Musharraf's attempt to oust Chaudhry. On Saturday, MQM thugs assumed this role. The private Aaj television channel showed pictures of its office under fire. Journalist Talat Hussain told BBC, "We are under attack. We have seen no security force. No one has come to help us."

As intended, the violence forced Chaudhry to abandon his plan to speak before the Sindh High Court Bar Association. After waiting in an airport lounge for nine hours, he returned to Islamabad.

The MQM's counter-rally, however, went ahead unimpeded.

The MQM, which has a long history of political violence, claims to represent the *mohajirs*, Urdu-speakers who moved to Pakistan from north India when the subcontinent was divided on communal lines in 1947-48. It controls Karachi's city government and is part of pro-Musharraf coalition governments nationally and in Sindh, the southern province of which Karachi is the capital.

By contracting out the bloody suppression of Saturday's protest in Karachi to the MQM, Musharraf hopes to be able to deny responsibility and avoid bringing further public opprobrium on the military.

But this is a transparent ruse.

Speaking from behind a massive bullet-proof enclosure to a government rally in Islamabad Saturday evening, Musharraf laid full blame for the bloody events in Karachi on the opposition, while holding up the MQM's rally as evidence of the popular support for this regime.

Musharraf claimed to be shocked and grieved by the numbers of dead and wounded, then proclaimed, "But what has happened today in Karachi is because of the chief justice who went there ignoring the advice of the government over the issue."

The president, who doubles as head of Pakistan's armed forces, then made a thinly-veiled threat of further violence, saying that the gun-battles in Karachi were the result of the obstinacy of the opposition. "If they think they are powerful, then they should know that the people's power is with us."

Musharraf also made an appeal to Pakistan's lawyers, who have spearheaded the protests over Chaudhry's suspension. In a reference to the government's recent reversal of its opposition to the suspended chief justice's demand that the Supreme Court as a whole hear the corruption allegations against him, Musharraf declared, "Now that the full court will be deciding the issue, the lawyers' fraternity should stop protesting and stop playing into the hands of some disgruntled and unwise people."

Musharraf's speech was also significant in that he confirmed that he intends to have the legislators now sitting in Pakistan's provincial and national assemblies re-elect him to a five year-term this fall, even though these legislators were chosen in an election in 2002 that

was manipulated by the military. Such a procedure is in flagrant violation of the constitution as is Musharraf's continuing to serve as both president and Chief of Pakistan's Armed Services.

Musharraf said, "After a few months, I will be contesting for the second term in office and then [i.e. after he has been returned as president] the elections of the national and provincial assemblies will be held."

Musharraf denied press reports that he will soon declare a state of emergency, claiming that the people are with him. But on Sunday, Interior Secretary Syed Kamal Shah was reported to have said that the government has authorized paramilitary troops to shoot anyone involved in serious violence. The Sindh government, meanwhile, has invoked an old British colonial statute, Section 144, to ban all political gatherings.

Washington has said nothing about last weekend's violence in Karachi. But in recent weeks, top Bush administration officials have voiced strong support for Musharraf and lauded him as a staunch US ally in the "war on terror" and a democrat.

The strength of the protests against Musharraf's attempt to sack the chief justice took the opposition by surprise. While the opposition parties have for years been promising to mount a "final struggle" against the Musharraf regime, they all in fact have an ambivalent relationship with Musharraf and Pakistan's military. The opposition parties are terrified that a confrontation with Musharraf could provide an opening for the entry of Pakistan's toiling masses into political struggle.

The MMA remains the government of North West Frontier Province and in a coalition government with the pro-Musharraf PML (Q) in Baluchistan. Benazir Bhutto, the PPP's leader for life, has recently publicly admitted that she is involved in backroom talks with the government aimed at reaching an accommodation with the Musharraf. As part of these maneuvers, the PPP leadership had been holding meetings with International Republican Institute, an arm of the US Republican Party.



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