

Pakistan's US-backed dictator lashes out

Repression fails to staunch anti-Musharraf protests

Keith Jones, Vilani Peiris
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An air of violence and desperation surrounds Pakistan's US-backed military regime.

Having failed to intimidate the populace by orchestrating violent attacks in Karachi on the weekend of May 12-13 that left more than 40 people dead, the regime of General Pervez Musharraf has lashed out with new repressive measures and threats. These include "preventative arrests" and a raft of regulations aimed at intimidating the press and silencing dissent.

An emergency meeting June 1 of the Pakistan Army's corps commanders and principal staff officers declared full support for Musharraf, who doubles as Pakistan's president and Chief of Armed Services. According to a statement from the Inter-Services Public Relations bureau, "The conference took note of the malicious campaign against institutions of the state, launched by vested interests and opportunists who are acting as obstructionist forces to serve their personal interests and agenda even at the cost of flouting the law."

Subsequently, Chaudhary Shujat Hussain—Musharraf's former prime minister and the current president of the most important political grouping that supports the general-president—charged that there is a campaign to malign the armed forces and that those involved in this campaign are "agents of RAW" (the secret police of Pakistan's arch-rival India) and "should be treated as traitors."

Last weekend private television stations were barred from broadcasting programs or televising discussions that touched on the controversy surrounding Musharraf's attempt to remove Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry on trumped-up corruption charges. (Chaudhry's real crime is that he issued a number of rulings that cut across the government's agenda, particularly in respect to the fire-sale of Pakistan Steel Mills and the disappearances of alleged terrorist suspects, causing Musharraf to doubt whether he could be relied on to rubber-stamp a phony presidential election this fall.)

Then on Monday the government gave the state regulator of broadcasting (PEMRA) sweeping new powers to issue ordinances governing the electronic media and to cancel the licenses, seize the equipment and seal the premises of broadcasters who violate its edicts.

"It's a repressive law," Talaat Hussein, Aaj TV's director of news told the BBC. "It's very clear that the government does not want any visuals on the TV screens which are against its policies."

The government has accused private television stations of fomenting opposition and of allowing the broadcasts of statements and images that are disrespectful to the army and judiciary. As Peter Goodspeed, a foreign correspondent with Canada's *National Post*, noted, Pakistan's generals are "said to be infuriated by film that showed tens of thousands of people shouting 'Musharraf is a dog!' and 'The generals are traitors' outside the Supreme Court."

The media restrictions have been coupled with a campaign of intimidation against journalists. According to a *New York Times* report, Hamid Mir, an announcer at GEO Television, has decided to send his family abroad "because of threats and because his children [have been] followed to school."

In the face of a public outcry, the government backed off slightly Thursday. After a meeting with representatives of the press and broadcasters, Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz announced that PEMRA's new powers have been suspended pending a governmental review.

Perhaps the military calculates that the media has gotten the message and will self-censor its reporting on the opposition movement; perhaps it intends to refine the regulations to make them a less flagrant attack on the rights of the press.

What is indubitable is that the Musharraf regime stands ready to unleash the security forces and military against the Pakistani people. On Wednesday and Thursday

security forces took hundreds of opposition activists into preventative detention in a vain attempt to stop anti-government demonstrations in Lahore, Islamabad and other cities.

The strength of the opposition movement has caused fissures in the regime, with the various political groupings hitherto loyal to Musharraf attacking each other for their respective roles in Musharraf's decision to sack the chief justice and the Karachi bloodbath.

As for the general himself, he has become increasingly critical of his political cronies for failing to rally popular support for his government's policies—a close partnership with US imperialism, privatization and other pro-investor measures, and various concessions to the religious right.

According to yesterday's edition of the (*Pakistan News*), Musharraf denounced the parliamentary deputies of the Pakistan Muslim League (Q) when he met with them Wednesday. Reported the *News*, "President General Pervez Musharraf on Wednesday blasted the ruling coalition, especially the Pakistan Muslim League leadership and the lawmakers for 'always leaving him in the lurch' and said the country would be in deep trouble if his set-up got changed."

The *News* further reported Musharraf as saying that of a thousand political appointees he could not even count on ten to speak in his defence: "I bluntly say that you always leave me alone in the time of trial and tribulation. Whether it was a change in the Afghan policy, Dr. A.Q Khan and Bugti issues, the judicial crisis or the May 12 incident, you never came to my support."

There is growing concern in Western capitals, which for the past eight years have steadfastly supported the Musharraf dictatorship, that the Pakistani regime is unraveling and, hence, growing calls for intervention to broker a deal between the military and the bourgeois opposition.

But the Bush administration remains adamant in its policy of unequivocal support for Musharraf, whom it has repeatedly proclaimed a key ally in the "war on terror." Speaking Monday, US State Department official Sean McCormack again solidarized the US government with Pakistan's military dictatorship: "[W]hat everybody wants to see: a more politically stable, more open, a more economically prosperous Pakistan. And that's—that is the program that President Musharraf's government has laid out. And we support that, we encourage that. There's a lot at stake, certainly. Pakistan is an important country in a very important region that has not known a lot of stability ... So the steps that the Pakistani government are—have

taken over the past several years, we believe are generally in the right direction and we want to encourage them."

Apart from Washington's backing, the other key factor in Musharraf's survival to date is the bourgeois opposition's complicity with the military and fear of the masses.

The alliance of the religious parties, the MMA, to this day rules the North-West Frontier Province under Musharraf and in Baluchistan it is in a governing coalition with the pro-Musharraf PML (Q). Nawaz Sharif, having been deposed as prime minister by Musharraf, is an indefatigable opponent of the general-president. But this industrialist and frequent ally of the religious right owes his political career, if not his business fortune, to his ties to the military establishment and government bureaucracy.

As for Benazir Bhutto and her Pakistan People's Party, while they posture as progressives and even socialists, their orientation is toward winning Washington's backing by vowing to be serve US interests even more faithfully than the current government, and toward making a deal with the military, if not the hated Musharraf himself.

In an interview with the *New York Times* this week, Bhutto again suggested she would be willing to work with the general if he gives up his post as military chief. "The fact that he was ready to engage with the PPP was positive," Bhutto told the *Times*, "I think he toyed with the idea of moderate forces getting together."

Bhutto has sought to justify a deal with Musharraf on the grounds of opposing the religious right Yet Musharraf himself has repeatedly connived with and bowed to the religious right and it is his reactionary alliance with Washington and socially incendiary neo-liberal economic policies that have provided a political climate in which the Islamic fundamentalists can pose as defender of the people's interests.

Bhutto told the *Times* that she much preferred a deal with the military over a popular upsurge against the dictatorship: "If the streets hold sway, then it is anyone's guess who actually captures the movement."



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