

Musharraf regime seeks to stave off collapse

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20 September 2007

A lawyer representing Pakistan's US-backed military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, told the country's Supreme Court Tuesday that "if" Musharraf is elected to a second term as president, he will resign as chief of the armed forces before taking the oath of office.

Opponents of the regime were quick to condemn Musharraf's pledge as a ruse aimed at subverting the country's constitution and the democratic will of the Pakistani people.

For months Musharraf has been laying the groundwork for a phony election, in which the sitting national and provincial assemblies will be called upon to constitute a presidential college and to elect him to serve as president until the fall of 2012.

Such a process would be a mockery of democracy. Not only were the current assemblies chosen in elections held five years ago, those elections were themselves fraudulent. Pakistan's military rulers placed numerous anti-democratic constraints on anti-government parties, while the military-sponsored Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam), and to a lesser extent the MMA, a six-party alliance of Islamic fundamentalist parties, benefited from state patronage and outright ballot-rigging.

The general has previously broken commitments to give up his post as military chief. In Dec. 2003, Musharraf secured the support of the MMA for a package of constitutional amendments legitimizing his 1999 coup, expanding the president's powers, and giving the military a permanent and commanding voice in the shaping of government policy, in return for a promise that he would step down as head of the military by the end of 2004.

More importantly, Musharraf's resignation pledge is a thinly veiled threat to use the full force of the military to ensure his stage-managed "re-election" as president and face down the burgeoning popular challenge to his regime. Otherwise, why not cede to the opposition's

longstanding demands, immediately step down as army chief, and contest the presidential election as a civilian?

Musharraf's lawyer did not say what would happen in the event the general is not "re-elected"—either because the Supreme Court rules that he cannot be a presidential candidate, as he has violated the constitutional prohibition on holding two government offices simultaneously, or if he failed to win the election. But the only inference one can draw is that he plans to remain head of the armed forces and invoke emergency rule or martial law.

Musharraf's aides and prominent leaders of the PML (Q) have raised such a possibility repeatedly over the past six months, including in the past few days. In mid-August, Musharraf was reportedly only dissuaded from such a strategy by a frantic late-night telephone call from US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Musharraf's resignation pledge has been unanimously rejected by the opposition, including Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP)—which, at the urging of Washington, has been seeking to negotiate a power-sharing deal with Musharraf. But the Bush administration effectively gave it the US's stamp of approval. White House Press Secretary Dana Perino declared that the issue of whether Musharraf should respect the Pakistani constitution and not hold or seek the presidency while heading the military "was an internal Pakistani matter that we'll let them debate."

Its dubious validity and threatening character notwithstanding, Musharraf's resignation pledge is a testament to the increasingly desperate crisis of his regime. Musharraf has always been loath to spell out when and under what conditions he will give up his post as military chief, because the military and its US patrons (most of the more than \$10 billion the US has sent Pakistan since 2001 has gone to the military) constitute his regime's principal bulwark.

If he now has had to make a formal pledge to give up his army post and in the country's supreme court, it is because his regime is unraveling.

Musharraf has reason to fear that the Supreme Court will rule his presidential candidacy unconstitutional; he hopes, by combining threats and the offer of weakening his hold on the reins of power, to win the justices' support for his remaining president.

Pakistan's Supreme Court is notorious for its subservience to the country's string of military rulers. But since Musharraf's attempt to sack Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry backfired, precipitating a mass opposition movement, the Supreme Court has repeatedly rendered decisions cutting across the government's plans. In July the court dismissed the government's trumped-up case against Chaudhry and, to the government's dismay, it ruled last month that Nawaz Sharif, the head of Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) and the prime minister deposed by Musharraf in 1999 could return to the county. (See "With Washington's blessing: Pakistani regime mounts massive security operation in Sharif deportation")

Behind the court's sudden new assertiveness lies the increasing apprehension within the country's bourgeois elite over the extent to which the military and various crony capitalists have monopolized the benefits of Pakistan's recent economic growth and apprehension over the mounting popular opposition to the regime. This opposition is fueled by the lack of democratic rights, spiraling prices, increasing social inequality, and the Musharraf regime's complicity in the US's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Musharraf's resignation vow is also part of his continuing courtship of Bhutto and her PPP.

Bhutto, the PPP chairperson-for-life and two-time prime minister, continues to play a double game. The PPP has condemned Musharraf remaining as army chief during the presidential election, criticized his plans to get himself re-elected by the current legislative assemblies, and said it may join Sharif's party, the MMA and other opposition groups in quitting the assemblies in an attempt to deny Musharraf the requisite quorum to secure his phony re-election as president.

But Bhutto has also not ruled out forming an alliance with Musharraf and has repeatedly warned of the danger that a popular agitation against the military

government could spin "out of control"

Bhutto has announced her return to Pakistan for October 18, which is not only a month away, but would most in all likelihood fall after Musharraf's stage-managed presidential election.

Recognizing that the Musharraf regime lacks popular legitimacy, the Bush administration has been desperately seeking to broker a deal with Bhutto, whose PPP is generally held to be the country's largest political party and has in the past postured as a progressive, even socialist party.

Washington's aim in strengthening the Pakistani regime is to make it better able to serve the US's predatory interests, beginning with the mounting of a bloody counter-insurgency war to root out the Taliban and other armed Islamicist groups in Pakistan.

Huge obstacles stand in the way of a Bhutto-Musharraf partnership. There are major differences over the divisions of the spoils of office and mutual suspicions, but also fears within the PPP that they may be embracing Musharraf as he politically approaches his death-rattle.



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