

With US backing, Musharraf presses ahead with bogus presidential election

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Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz filed papers with the country's election commission Thursday nominating military strongman Pervez Musharraf as a candidate for the bogus presidential election to be held October 6.

In flagrant violation of Pakistan's constitution Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 coup, is seeking to have himself "re-elected" president till 2012 by an electoral college comprised of national and provincial legislators who were chosen fully five years ago and in military stage-managed elections that were palpably neither fair nor free.

Moreover, Musharraf is standing for the presidency while retaining his post as Chief of Armed Services, although Pakistan's constitution explicitly prohibits those serving in the military from holding political office.

If Musharraf refuses to stand for election as a civilian, it is both because he wants to ensure that he is in a position to personally supervise the suppression of the popular opposition to his latest power-grab and so that he can threaten the populace and elite alike with his continued control of the military and a resort to emergency rule should his bogus election scheme unravel.

That Musharraf will step down as head of Pakistan's armed forces only if he is elected president was implicit in the wording of the undertaking his lawyer gave the Supreme Court on September 18 that he will be sworn in to a new term as president in civilian dress.

This week Pakistan's Attorney-General Malik Mohammad Qayyum made this explicit, telling the Supreme Court that "If he loses" the presidential election, "President Musharraf will continue to remain in uniform till the time another army chief is appointed"

In a further display of the utterly undemocratic and fraudulent character of the coming election, the regime mobilized thousands of riot police and elite army commandos and used trucks and shipping containers to blockade roads into Islamabad overnight, so as to prevent Musharraf's opponents from demonstrating outside the election commission's offices Thursday.

Shortly before Prime Minister Aziz formally launched Musharraf's candidacy, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Iftikhar Chaudhry, ordered the government to release opposition leaders, including prominent parliamentarians, who had been arrested last weekend on the grounds that their plans to mount anti-Musharraf protests constituted a threat to public order.

Deputy Information Minister Tariq Azim said the judge's ruling "will be fully implemented" and, according to the Associated Press, Javed Hashmi, the acting leader of the opposition Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), and 44 other opposition activists were subsequently released from a Rawalpindi prison.

However, the PML (N) and the coalition of Islamic parties with which it is aligned, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), and the government have given very different figures on the number of opposition activists detained. While the government has spoken of a hundred or so, the MMA

has said that more than 600 of its activists were taken into preventive detention in recent days.

Earlier this year Musharraf sought to remove Chief Justice Chaudhry on trumped up corruption charges, because he feared that Chaudhry would not lead the court in giving juridical blessing to his attempt to further subvert the constitution by staging a bogus presidential election.

But the move backfired, with the opposition to Chaudhry's dismissal becoming the catalyst for mass protests against the government and in July, the Supreme Court defied the government and ordered the Chief Justice reinstated.

A panel of the Supreme Court is currently hearing a series of petitions challenging the legality of the October 6 election and of Musharraf's candidacy. Chaudhry declined to sit on the panel, saying he didn't want to leave any possibility that the court's impartiality could be questioned.

Pakistan's highest court has a long and sordid history of acquiescing before the military and giving legal sanction to authoritarian rule.

On Monday, the court dismissed three of the ten petitions challenging Musharraf's right to contest the October 6 presidential elections.

Such action, at the very least, gives Musharraf more time to try to work out a power-sharing deal with Benazir Bhutto and her Pakistan People's Party (PPP.) Were Musharraf to secure the support of the PPP, he would likely have sufficient support in the National Assembly to orchestrate constitutional changes sanctioning the perpetuation of his rule.

Given the extreme divisions within Pakistan's ruling elite, it cannot be excluded that the court could rule Musharraf does not have the right to contest the presidential election.

The general's actions, especially the repeated threats, conveyed by his cronies, of the possible imposition of emergency rule and his pledge to give up his post as head of Pakistan's armed forces, belie great nervousness as to what the court will decide.

A large part of the bourgeois establishment is angered by the extent that the Punjabi-dominated officer corps and the cronies of the Musharraf regime have monopolized the benefits accruing to the elite from the state's neo-liberal policies, including privatization, and the more than \$10 billion in aid that the US has provided Islamabad over the past six years.

There is also great apprehension over the growth of popular anti-Musharraf sentiment, fueled by rising prices, poverty and social inequality, the lack of basic democratic rights, and Musharraf's complicity in the US's predatory wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

And the elite, including the military itself, is further divided over the repeated sharp shifts Musharraf has had to make since September 2001, so as to square the use of Islamacist militias as a tool of Pakistan's geo-political strategy and the religious right as a bulwark against the working class with Washington's needs and wishes.

The All Parties Democratic Movement (APDM), the alliance between the PML (N) of deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the MMA, announced on Thursday that all their legislators in the national and provincial parliaments will resign October 2 to protest Musharraf's illegal

election bid. The APDM claims that the resignations will make it legally impossible for the election commission to proceed with the October 6 election, since the MMA forms the government in the North-West Frontier Province and the province's governor will be legally bound to accept an MMA recommendation that the assembly be dissolved.

Both the PML (N) and the MMA have repeatedly threatened to stage mass resignations of their legislators. But the MMA, which in 2003 helped pass constitutional amendments sanctioning Musharraf's coup and expanding his powers as president and the military's role in determining state policy, till this day forms a coalition government with the pro-military Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam) in Baluchistan.

The PPP, meanwhile, continues to maneuver. It has threatened to join the other major opposition parties in quitting the assemblies unless Musharraf meets several conditions, including lifting a two-term limit on the prime ministership, which would bar Bhutto from becoming prime minister, and the waiving of all corruption and other charges against political leaders. But the PPP has also filed presidential nomination papers on behalf of one of its leaders, Makhdoom Amin Fahim, and continues to seek a power-sharing deal with Musharraf.

"We are intentionally leaving some ambiguities on certain issues," a PPP spokesman told the *Dawn* Tuesday.

The National Action Committee of Lawyers—which arose as a result of the agitation against Justice Chaudhry's "suspension" and quickly proved more willing and capable of organizing an anti-government agitation than the established political parties—has vowed to organize mass protests against Musharraf's candidacy. At the same time it is sponsoring the token opposition candidacy of Wajihuddin Ahmad. Six years ago, Ahmad resigned from the Supreme Court rather than swear allegiance to the 2001 Provisional Constitutional Ordinance, which provided a constitutional fig-leaf for the Musharraf regime.

The Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting Muhammad Ali Durrani has welcomed Ahmad's candidacy for the presidency, saying, not without some truth, that it gives legitimacy to the elections. Declared Durrani, "This development manifests that the lawyers, unlike the opposition parties, have rejected politics of strikes and resignations. The nomination by the legal fraternity has removed all questions raised by the opposition parties regarding the legality of presidential elections".

The election commission reported at the end of Thursday that nomination papers had been filed on behalf of forty candidates. But, according to press reports, few of those seeking to stand for the presidency represent an established party.

Washington, meanwhile, has made very clear its attitude to Musharraf's bogus election and to the political crisis in Pakistan—something, moreover, that will not have been lost on the Supreme Court justices.

The Bush administration is desperately seeking to broker a political partnership between Musharraf, whom it has long hailed as a pivotal ally in the "war on terror," and Bhutto whom it hopes can provide the regime with vitally needed popular legitimacy.

Washington has also made clear that it expects and will demand that a strengthened Musharraf regime mount a bloody campaign to root out the Taliban and other armed Islamist groups—a campaign that given the modus operandi of the Pakistani military and the political unrest in the tribal areas and much of Baluchistan and the North-West Frontier Province will in all likelihood take the form of a civil war.

Whilst traditionally the Islamacists have been dependent on state-military patronage, in recent years they have been able to expand their popular following in the more backward parts of Pakistan due to the manifest failure of the Pakistani bourgeois state to provide the most basic public services and popular opposition to the US occupation of Afghanistan.

Much was made in the US press over the fact that on Monday US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice issued a statement mildly criticizing

the Pakistani government for arresting PML (N) and MMA leaders.

But the Bush administration, which has time and again supported the repressive acts of the Musharraf regime, including turning a blind eye to the massacre of more than 40 Karachis on May 12-13, has maintained a complicit silence on Musharraf's clinging to his post as military chief and his plans to have himself "re-elected" as president by legislators chosen five years ago in a vote that was fixed by the military. These, according to the State Department, are "internal" Pakistani matters.

Questioned repeatedly this week about events in Pakistan, US State Department spokesman Tom Casey asserted at every opportunity that Washington and the dictator Musharraf share a common vision for a "democratic" Pakistan. Said Casey, "I would hope that all of us share the goal that President Musharraf has laid out, that I think many other political figures in Pakistan share, which is the idea of having that country develop as a moderate democratic Islamic country."

Casey denied that Benazir Bhutto, who visited Washington this week, met with State Department officials. But she did appear on Capitol Hill, and according to the *Dawn* was given, in striking contrast with previous visits over the past decade, a gushing reception.

The life chairperson of the PPP, a party which in the past has postured as socialist, Bhutto has repeatedly said that she wants to strike a deal with Musharraf because she fears a popular agitation against his government would escape the control of the political elite.

As part of her ongoing effort to woo Washington—which has a record almost as old as the country itself of sponsoring military rule in Pakistan—Bhutto told a Capitol Hill audience Tuesday that were the PPP to come to power it would give the UN based International Atomic Energy Agency the right to question Dr. A.Q. Khan, the so-called "father" of Pakistan's nuclear bomb. US legislators and government officials have long wanted to put questions to Khan, who traded in nuclear secrets and is currently under house arrest in Pakistan. The Bush administration would undoubtedly seek to use Khan's interrogation to whip up public fears about nuclear proliferation to Iran—that is, to abet its plans for the widening of US military action in the oil-rich Persian Gulf region.

Bhutto is more than willing to be an accomplice in this crime, if it helps her gain a share of power in Islamabad.



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