

Bush, Bhutto accomplices in Pakistan's sham presidential election

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Pakistan's Supreme Court issued a judgment Friday that gives a provisional judicial stamp of approval for the sham presidential election the country's military regime is to stage today with the aim of making General Pervez Musharraf Pakistan's president till the fall of 2012.

But while the court ruled that the election, which patently violates both the spirit and letter of the constitution, can proceed, it reserved judgment on whether Musharraf is legally entitled to be a presidential candidate and instructed the election commission not to proclaim Musharraf elected till after it rules on the matter.

"The bench has unanimously resolved and directed that the election process should proceed," announced Justice Javed Iqbal. "... But final notification of the returning candidate will not be issued until the decision of the issue for this petition for which the process is to begin October 17."

The ruling was a setback for Musharraf, who seized power in a military coup in October 1999 and has been a pivotal and much-lauded ally of the Bush administration in its wars of aggression in Afghanistan and Iraq. Pakistan's President and Chief of Armed Services had been looking to the Pakistani judiciary, which has a long and sordid record of sanctioning military rule, to give both Saturday's stage-managed presidential election and his candidacy its seal of approval.

Nevertheless, Musharraf can take considerable comfort in Friday's ruling. The presidential election is to proceed on the timetable and in the flagrantly unconstitutional manner dictated by the military government, thereby lending the sham election a wholly unwarranted air of legitimacy. The Attorney-General, meanwhile, has observed that nothing prevents the Election Commission from releasing "provisional" results.

Had the court ordered the election delayed pending its final ruling, the parliamentary opposition would have been able to make good on its threat to force the dissolution of the North-West Frontier Province legislature, thereby further highlighting the election's illegitimacy and illegality. (Under the Pakistani constitution, the president—whose powers have been greatly expanded during Musharraf's authoritarian rule—is elected indirectly, by an electoral college made up of the sitting members of the national and four provincial parliaments.)

Late last month a different panel of the Supreme Court had

ruled against a number of challenges to the constitutionality of the elections and Musharraf's candidacy, but without ruling definitively on the constitutional issues at stake. That is to say, the court rejected the challenges for technical reasons, on the grounds that they were premature or that those filing the petitions did not have the legal right to do so. The court did not explicitly declare that the current national and provincial parliaments, which were elected five years ago in elections skewed by military supervision and ballot-rigging, have the legal power to choose Pakistan's president till 2012; nor did it expressly rule that Musharraf can stand for election as president despite a constitutional prohibition on members of the military participating in politics and a second provision, only recently declared null and void by the election commission, barring persons who have held non-elected government jobs from standing for election until two years after their retirement.

It is highly possible that Pakistan's Supreme Court, like its ruling elite as a whole, is badly split over Musharraf's scheme to retain the presidency for a further five years and perpetuate the military's dominant role in the country's political and economic life.

The previous Supreme Court panel split 6 to 3 in ruling against the petitions challenging the constitutionality of the presidential elections and Musharraf's candidacy.

That said, the court's decision to resume its deliberations on the constitutional challenges to the presidential election on October 17 is highly significant and strongly suggests that its lack of a definitive ruling has an ulterior purpose: to prod the general-president into consummating a political partnership with Benazir Bhutto, the former prime minister and "life chairperson" of the Pakistan People's Party now much in Washington's favor.

October 17 is the date Bhutto has set for her return to Pakistan, ending eight years of self-imposed exile.

Under heavy pressure from the Bush administration and to a lesser extent the British government of Gordon Brown, Bhutto and Musharraf have been negotiating a political realignment, under which Musharraf will retain the presidency and Bhutto become his prime minister, since at least last spring. In late July, the general flew to Dubai for a secret meeting with Bhutto.

Concluding a deal has proven highly problematic, however. Not only has Musharraf been chary about parting with real power. His allies in the military-sponsored PML (Q) have been bitterly resisting any power-sharing with the PPP because they know it will result in their marginalization. The military, for its part, is anxious not only to ensure that it retains control over the vast military budget and a decisive say in “national security” matters, but also that the extensive wealth and economic power of the officer corps are protected.

Bhutto, meanwhile, has seen her hand in the negotiations strengthened by the mounting and increasingly vocal popular opposition to the Musharraf regime—opposition the government has failed to quell with various ham-fisted methods, including last March’s failed attempt to sack the chief justice of the Supreme Court and the May 12-13 bloodbath in Karachi.

But Bhutto and the PPP leadership recognize that the popular opposition to Musharraf constitutes for them a double-edged sword. The PPP’s claims to be a fighter for democracy and progressive change could be fatally compromised in the eyes of ordinary Pakistanis by their allying with Musharraf.

This week both Musharraf and his cronies and Bhutto and her PPP tried to use the approach of the presidential elections and the pending court ruling on their constitutionality to exert maximum leverage in the power-sharing negotiations

At the beginning of the week, Musharraf let it be known that General Ashaq Pervez Khan, the former head of the country’s most important intelligence agency, the ISI, will replace him as chief of Pakistan’s armed forces, if and when he is elected president.

According to press reports, General Khan has played a major role in the negotiations with Bhutto and flew with Musharraf to meet her in Dubai last July.

On Wednesday, Bhutto claimed that the negotiations with Musharraf were “totally stalled” and threatened that she would instruct the PPP’s legislators to resign their seats. “The resignation of the Pakistan People’s Party MPs will be a severe blow to the legitimacy of the election,” she thundered.

Earlier in the week, the PPP’s erstwhile allies in the opposition to Musharraf and military rule, the parliamentarians from Nawaz Sharif’s PML (N), and many legislators from the MMA, an alliance of Islamic parties, quit their seats to protest the impending sham presidential election.

But by Thursday, Bhutto was singing a very different tune. She told a packed London press conference that a power-sharing deal with Musharraf was imminent and that she would be instructing the PPP legislators to participate in Saturday’s bogus election.

According to Bhutto, the PPP will not vote for the general as long as he remains in uniform, thus implying that the PPP could in the future give him a non-binding vote of confidence as a civilian president. The PPP legislators will either abstain or vote for the PPP’s vice-president who has been accredited as a presidential candidate. But Musharraf doesn’t need the PPP’s

votes in today’s election. He has enough votes from the military-sponsored PML (Q) and the Karachi-based MQM to comfortably win. But he certainly wants and needs the PPP to lend the sham elections legitimacy.

Late Friday evening, Musharraf formally signed into law a “National Reconciliation Ordinance” that gives an amnesty to all politicians and bureaucrats who held office between 1988 and October 12, 1999 not convicted of any crime. Bhutto had made a condition of any deal with Musharraf the dropping of corruption charges against her and various criminal charges against other top PPP leaders.

The amnesty would appear not to apply to Nawaz Sharif, whom Musharraf deposed as prime minister and who was subsequently convicted on various charges by the military regime.

Both Bhutto and Musharraf have publicly admitted that Washington played a role in this week’s negotiations. The reality is that the Bhutto-Musharraf deal is a result of the criminal machinations of US imperialism. Far from being a path to democracy it is meant to safeguard the US’s predatory interests in the region and preserve the dominant role of Washington’s principal ally in the country, the military.

In recent weeks Bush administration officials have made highly selective criticisms of the Musharraf’s regime’s flagrant violations of basic democratic rights, with the aim of pushing Musharraf into a partnership with Bhutto. Thus Washington did not criticize the military regime when it mobilized thousands of security forces in early September to arrest Sharif on his attempted return to Pakistan, then sent him back into exile. Nor has it ever criticized today’s sham presidential election, although it is the antithesis of fair or free.



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