

# Pakistan: Musharraf regime reiterates martial law threat

## US-sponsored deal with Bhutto begins to unravel

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Pakistan's US-backed military regime has reiterated its threat to impose martial law should the country's highest court not give its blessing to General Pervez Musharraf remaining president till 2012.

It has also reportedly suspended talks with Benazir Bhutto and her Pakistan People's Party (PPP) about a power-sharing agreement and the composition of an interim government, which would hold office in the run-up to legislative elections next January, until the Supreme Court rules on the constitutionality of Musharraf's "re-election" as president.

"According to insiders," reported on Tuesday by Pakistan's largest English-language daily, the *Dawn*, "the government ... has made it clear that a verdict against Gen. Musharraf could change the entire political scenario, especially the understanding with the PPP."

Musharraf, whom the Bush administration continues to laud as a pivotal US ally, has repeatedly tried to bully the court and the Pakistani people into accepting the legitimacy of the sham October 6 presidential election by saying that otherwise he will refuse to step down as head of Pakistan's armed forces and could impose martial law. In mid-August, US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice reportedly had to telephone Musharraf twice in a single day, including once at 2 a.m., to dissuade the general from declaring a national emergency.

Responding to an earlier government threat that a ruling against Musharraf could result in martial law, Justice Javed Iqbal, the head of the Supreme Court panel that is hearing the challenges to Musharraf's election declared October 18, "These threats have no value for us. This is an issue to be decided in accordance with the law and according to the merits."

Iqbal has said that the court will finish hearing arguments concerning the constitutionality of Musharraf's election no later than next week.

To Musharraf's dismay, the Supreme Court has issued several important rulings that cut across his government's agenda since his attempt to pressure the court into rubber-stamping his re-election by sacking the chief justice backfired, precipitating a wave of mass protests. These rulings are a product of widespread anger within Pakistan's elite over the extent to which the military regime has practiced crony capitalism, monopolizing both government patronage and the benefits of capitalist growth, and of

elite apprehension over the possibility of mass popular unrest against an authoritarian government that has presided over deepening social inequality and provided pivotal support to the US's wars of aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, Pakistan's highest court may well give Musharraf's latest coup its sanction. It has a long and sordid history of countenancing dictatorship and, much as there is widespread resentment within the elite over military rule, there is also recognition that a clash between the military and the populace could gravely undermine bourgeois rule.

The Pakistani Supreme Court gave its blessing to Musharraf's 1999 coup and to subsequent changes to the constitution that greatly increased the powers of the president and the role of the military in determining government policy, while barring the country's best-known politicians, Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, head of the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam (PML-Q), from being able to stand for a third term as prime minister.

The court also rejected petitions that had asked it to delay the October 6th presidential election pending its ruling on the constitutionality of a number of election issues. The court must rule on the validity of having legislative assemblies elected five years ago in elections stage-managed by the military constitute the presidential electoral college and the constitutionality of Musharraf standing for the president while continuing to serve as Pakistan's chief of armed services.

The Bush administration, for its part, has made very clear that it accepts the legitimacy of Musharraf's sham election.

Even should the Supreme Court rule in Musharraf's favor, it is highly possible the government will soon resort to martial law, in an attempt to staunch or preempt the eruption of mass opposition and to scupper a US-backed power-sharing deal with Bhutto and her PPP. The leadership of the military-sponsored PML-Q, which currently dominates the national and Punjab governments, and sections of the military itself are known to oppose the deal with Bhutto, because it threatens their power and wealth.

The government seized on the October 18 terrorist attack on Benazir Bhutto and her welcoming procession—an attack that killed more than 135 people—as a pretext to try to limit campaigning for the long promised assembly elections.

On Sunday the government announced that in the name of security it would impose a complete ban on campaign processions

and allow public meetings only at government stipulated sites. “We cannot outright ban election campaigns of the political parties. Therefore, they will be allowed to hold public meetings at places to be specified by the provincial governments,” said interior minister Aftab Ahmad Khan Sherpao.

But after a public outcry Bhutto and other opposition politicians said that if the government proceeded with the ban they would not abide by it, the government made an about-face, saying it had no intention to ban public rallies.

Maulana Fazul Rehman, the secretary-general of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, a coalition of Islamic fundamentalist parties, has frequently been criticized by other opponents of the Musharraf regime for conniving with the government. Yet even he issued a warning on Wednesday that the government is deliberately trying to create a situation for “imposing emergency as well as martial law in the country by cornering the opposition by different tactics.”

Meanwhile, the US-brokered power-sharing deal between Bhutto and Musharraf now hangs by a thread.

Acutely aware of the increasing isolation of the Musharraf regime, the Bush administration, with the support Britain’s Brown government, has sought to reconfigure Pakistan’s military-dominated government by engineering a deal between Musharraf, the military, and Bhutto. Their aim is to use the PPP, which in the past has posed as a progressive and even a socialist party, to provide the Musharraf regime with greater legitimacy, so it can embark on a bloody military offensive aimed at rooting out support for the Taliban and other armed Islamicist groups in the more historically backward regions of Pakistan.

While the US did succeed in securing an amnesty for Bhutto from a series of corruption charges thereby getting the PPP onboard in supporting the phony October 6 presidential election, its effort to forge Musharraf-Bhutto partnership has been undermined by strong opposition to the deal within both camps, Musharraf’s refusal to accept that his presidential powers be curtailed, and, last but not least, the mounting popular opposition to the government.

The October 18 attack on Bhutto’s Karachi procession, which came only hours after her return from eight years of exile, may well have set in train a political dynamic that results in the power-sharing deal’s collapse.

Bhutto has repeatedly publicly accused elements within the government of orchestrating or facilitating an attempt by pro-Taliban or Al Qaeda operatives to kill her. In particular she has pointed to the fact that street lights were shut-off on the major Karachi artery on which her procession was passing, thus greatly facilitating the suicide attack.

Given the long history of Pakistani military and government patronage of armed Islamic groups, Bhutto’s claims are entirely plausible and merit investigation.

But government supporters, especially PML-Q, Chaudhy Shujaat Hussain, have taken great exception to Bhutto’s charges, publicly accusing the PPP of staging the assassination attempt to win public sympathy.

Hussain, who is known to have bitterly opposed any deal with Bhutto, told a television network Monday, “We will also say all this was a conspiracy,” a conspiracy that Hussain claimed had

been “hatched” and “implemented” by Bhutto’s husband, Asif Ali Zardari. As “proof,” Hussain pointed to the fact that Bhutto had gotten down from the roof of the armored vehicle in which she was traveling minutes before the suicide-bomb attack was carried out.

Bhutto has demanded that the Pakistani government involve foreign security agencies in its investigation of the bombing, but this has been categorically rejected by the government. “Pakistan is a sovereign country,” declared prime minister and former Citibank vice-president Shaukat Aziz. “We know what we are doing. We don’t need assistance.”

In deference to Bhutto’s wishes, the senior detective investigating the Karachi terrorist attack has stepped down. Bhutto had objected to his leading the investigation, because, she claimed he had been present in 1999 when her husband, under detention on corruption charges, was allegedly tortured.

In a further indication of the bad blood between the government and Bhutto, the government has apparently put her on the Exit Control List (ECL), thus denying her the right to leave the country. Bhutto’s spokesman Farhatullah Babar told BBC that as a result of the National Reconciliation Ordinance, which gave Bhutto amnesty, the exit-order was supposed to have been lifted, but that it was re-imposed after her return to Pakistan.

Thus less than a week after Bhutto returned to Pakistan to pursue, with strong US support, a partnership with Musharraf, she and much of the military-led government, although, at least not publicly Musharraf, have effectively drawn daggers against each other.

They agree, however, that the most fundamental democratic rights of the Pakistani people are entirely expendable. In the case of the PPP—whose popular credentials largely rest on the fact that the party’s founder, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was hanged on the orders of General Zia ul Huq—this is exemplified by the readiness of his daughter, Benazir, to ally with the military and at the bequest of Washington, which has been the bulwark of a succession of Pakistani military dictatorships.

To win the Bush administration’s favour, Bhutto has repeatedly attacked the Musharraf regime for not doing enough to assist Washington in pursuit of its predatory objectives in Central Asia and the Middle East. She has charged the current Pakistani government of not providing enough military support for Afghanistan’s US-installed government, promised to assist the US propaganda campaign against Iran by handing over to the International Atomic Energy Agency the former head of Pakistan’s nuclear program, and said that under certain conditions she would allow the US military to conduct operations inside Pakistan.



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