Bhutto and Sharif decry dictatorship, while seeking a deal with Pakistan's US-backed military regime

Keith Jones
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Pakistan is now in its twenty-third full day of de facto martial law. Basic civil liberties have been suspended. Thousands of government opponents—members of opposition parties, lawyers, human rights activists and trade unionists—remain in detention. Police break up anti-government protests with baton charges and mass arrests on a daily basis and the US-supported, military-dominated government has made civilians who challenge the rule of General President Pervez Musharraf liable to court martial.

Yet, even as they fulminate against military rule, all major factions of Pakistan's traditional bourgeois political establishment are angling for a deal with the military and its supporters and bankrollers in Washington.

Only after the military regime had twice placed Benazir Bhutto under house arrest and arrested and roughed up thousands of her supporters did the "life chairperson" of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) announce, November 12, that she had "definitively" broken off power-sharing negotiations with Musharraf.

Now, bowing to pressure from the Bush administration, Bhutto has signaled that her PPP will participate in the bogus national and provincial elections the military regime intends to hold January 8. And the other major parties, beginning with the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) of deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who returned to Pakistan yesterday, appear set to follow suit, thereby serving as direct accomplices of the military regime.

Musharraf has indicated that the elections will likely take place with martial law still in effect, meaning most campaigning will be illegal and only the tamest criticism of the government and military will be allowed. Even more importantly, the elections are designed to legitimize and give a democratic façade to a political set-up in which the military retains decisive control over the Pakistani state through a strong presidency, a military-dominated National Security Council with sweeping powers of constitutional oversight over important government actions, and a judiciary that under Musharraf's martial law regime has been purged of elements deemed "disruptive" by Pakistan's generals.

Last Thursday, Bhutto announced that the PPP would file nomination papers for a full slate of candidates for the January 8 elections, saying "We don't want to give a walkover to our opponents." On Sunday, she herself filed nomination papers for a National Assembly constituency in southern Sindh. "God willing, an election will be held and the People's Party and the people will win," Bhutto told reporters.

Bhutto is claiming that her PPP has yet to take a final decision on whether to contest the elections. But this is clearly only so as to overcome opposition within her own party to such a craven act of collaboration with Musharraf and so as to provide the PPP an escape hatch should the popular protests against the government suddenly escalate, whether on account of the brutal martial law regime or the burgeoning economic crisis. (The current caretaker government is reported to be on the verge of announcing a 15 to 20 percent hike in oil prices.)

Nawaz Sharif, the prime minister whom Musharraf overthrew by way of his 1999 coup, and the leader of what is generally held to be Pakistan's second largest party, has vowed to lead a 17-party alliance, the All-Parties Democratic Movement, in boycotting the elections. But he too has instructed his party to fulfill all the legal formalities to participate in the elections and his brother and close advisor, Shahbaz Sharif, told reporters in London Saturday before joining Nawaz in his return to Pakistan that if the PPP chooses to contest the elections a boycott cannot work.

Shabhaz refused to rule out Nawaz Sharif himself filing nomination papers Monday, although his candidacy could subsequently be struck down by the pro-Musharraf Election Commission because of his 2000 conviction on treason and kidnapping charges in a sham-trial mounted by the Musharraf regime.

The PPP, the PML (N), and the third major ostensible opposition grouping, the Islamic fundamentalist Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal**(**MMA), have claimed repeatedly over the past four years to be on the verge of launching a joint popular mobilization against the military regime, only to delay any action and trade accusations as to who thwarted the anti-Musharraf campaign. While the MMA has pointed to the

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longstanding back-channel contacts between Bhutto and Musharraf (contacts that climaxed in the Bush administration's concerted attempt over the past six months to broker a Musharraf-Bhutto alliance), the PPP has chastised the MMA for serving the Musharraf regime by forming the government in the North-West Frontier Province and by participating in a governmental coalition with the pro-Musharraf PML (Q) in Baluchistan.

Should the PPP and PML (N) contest the elections, there is no question that the MMA, whose constituent elements have also been filing candidate nomination papers, will also quickly drop its boycott rhetoric. Indeed, one of the MMA's foremost leaders, Maulana Fazlur Rehman, has announced definitively that he and his party, the JUF (I), will participate in the elections. Rehman, who is infamous for his close relations to the Musharraf regime, met with the US Ambassador to Pakistan Anne Patterson Nov. 20. According to Rehman, she strongly urged him to participate in the military regime's elections. The day before her discussions with Rehman, Patterson met with Bhutto and no doubt delivered her the same message.

Both Nawaz and Shabhaz Sharif have vehemently denied claims that their return was the result of a deal with the Musharraf regime. Government spokesmen, however, have claimed that there is an understanding, although they have provided no details.

Early last week Musharraf, accompanied by Pakistan's intelligence chief, made an impromptu visit to Saudi Arabia, for talks about Sharif, who was exiled there in 2000. In the past Musharraf has mused about a possible deal with Sharif and his re-entry into Pakistani politics and the revival of the Punjab-based PML (N) could serve the military government by acting as a counter-weight to the Sindh-based PPP. But there is much press speculation that Musharraf's hand was forced by a decision of Saudi King Abdullah, possibly acting at Washington's bequest, to stop acting effectively as Sharif's jailer. Until now the Bush administration has had little time for Sharif and it effectively supported his re-deportation from Pakistan last September. But there is nothing in Sharif's conservative politics that would militate against Washington working with him.

What can be said with assurance is that King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia—who like Musharraf is a close ally of the Bush administration and certainly no advocate of democracy—would not have released Sharif from the terms of his exile in Saudi Arabia and effectively sponsored his return to Pakistan if he had not been certain that Sharif would not cut across Washington's plans to maintain a military-dominated government in Pakistan.

Not only did King Abdullah meet for two hours and dine with Sharif on Friday, he lent him the plane that brought him back to Pakistan.

The scion of a family of industrialists, Nawaz Sharif has traditionally had close connections to the military, big business in his native Punjab, and the religious right, which the military has itself long patronized. Sharif began his political career in the mid-1980s as a protégé of another military dictator, General Zia, and the pro-Musharraf party that the military sponsored after ousting Sharif, the PML (Q), is largely formed by defectors from Naswaz's PML.

That said, there is no shortage of bad blood between Musharraf and Sharif. After all, the two clashed over Pakistan's 1999 Kargil military adventure in Indian-occupied Kashmir, and when Sharif moved to oust Musharraf as head of the military in October 1999, the latter activated pre-existing plans for a coup.

In early September, when the Sharif brothers first attempted to end seven years of exile, the military mounted a massive security operation, sealing off Islamabad airport, taking the two into custody, and then quickly putting them on a plane back to Saudi Arabia.

Yesterday, the government again mounted a major mobilization of security forces, deploying more than 6,000 police in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent large numbers of PML (N) supporters from greeting the brothers at Lahore airport. In the hours before their return, large numbers of PML (N) activists were also taken into preventive detention. While a spokesman for Sharif's party put the number at 1,800, a government official scoffed that the total was more like 100. Nevertheless, unlike in early September, the Sharifs have been allowed to enter the country.

If all sections of the bourgeois opposition are conniving with the Musharraf regime and contemplating participating in the sham January 8 elections, it is because they all covet a slice of political power and the patronage prerogative that goes with it and fear that if they boycott the elections their rivals will benefit. Even more importantly, they all are terrified of a genuine popular mobilization against military rule, for they recognize that the military is the bulwark of their privileges—of the Pakistani nation-state and Pakistan's vastly unequal property-relations.

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