

Deepening political crisis in Pakistan

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The political crisis in Pakistan continues to mount as supporters of Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) prepare to hold a rally today in the garrison town of Rawalpindi to challenge the imposition of martial law by military strongman President Pervez Musharraf last Saturday.

The authorities have declared the rally illegal and threatened to arrest anyone taking part. Rawalpindi, near the capital of Islamabad, is the headquarters for the Pakistani army and air force. The PPP claims that the police have detained at least 800 party activists in cities and towns throughout the Punjab in an effort to prevent the demonstration from proceeding.

The PPP is demanding the restoration of the country's constitution and that Musharraf step down as armed forces chief and hold fresh parliamentary elections. Bhutto demagogically declared on Wednesday that "the regime will find it difficult to put them in jails," appealing for her supporters to make their way to Rawalpindi. "I understand my liberty might be at stake," she added melodramatically.

Of all the main opposition leaders, Bhutto is the only one who still enjoys complete freedom of movement. She returned to Pakistan on October 18 after reaching a US-brokered powersharing deal with Musharraf that would have enabled him to remain as president and her to become prime minister after new parliamentary elections. Musharraf's declaration of emergency rule was prompted by fears that the Supreme Court intended to overrule last month's presidential vote—a military-orchestrated sham that explicitly violated the constitution.

One aim of Bhutto's call for today's rally and "a long march" next week from Lahore to Islamabad is to revive her own flagging political credentials. Over the past week, it has been lawyers, civil rights activists and students who have protested against the military regime's draconian measures and borne the brunt of police batons and tear gas. Hundreds, if not thousands, have been detained. Treason charges, which carry the death penalty, have been brought against some of those arrested.

For all her rhetoric about "democracy", the PPP's demands are carefully crafted to remain within parameters that are acceptable to Washington. Bhutto is not calling for the removal of Musharraf and an end to the military dictatorship established by his first coup in 1999. She is not demanding the reversal of Musharraf's purging of the Supreme Court, including the ousting of chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry. Significantly, PPP chairman Shah Mehmoud Qureshi was booed and branded "a collaborator" on Monday at a meeting of lawyers preparing to protest.

Bhutto is seeking to exploit today's protest to pressure Musharraf to stick by their previous agreement. At her press conference on Wednesday, she implicitly left the door open for further negotiations with the regime. "I think we should all come down as strongly as we can for the restoration of democracy," she said, then added: "And if General Musharraf wants to find a way out, well, the ball is in his court."

Bhutto is relying heavily on the Bush administration to pull Musharraf into line. While US criticisms of its close ally have been very muted, Musharraf's decision to impose emergency rule was a blow to Washington's plans. By incorporating Bhutto as prime minister, the White House was seeking to stabilise the increasingly shaky regime in Islamabad. According to Bush, he told Musharraf in a "frank discussion" by phone on Wednesday that the Pakistani leader had to relinquish his army post and set a date for parliamentary elections.

The Pakistani president announced yesterday that he would step aside as army chief once his presidency was confirmed and he set a new deadline for parliamentary elections by mid-February—a month later than previously planned. Given that his loyalists will remain firmly in charge of the military and emergency rule remains in place, the latest announcement is purely cosmetic. The White House immediately praised the statement. But, at this stage, Bhutto has dismissed the declaration as too "vague" and insisted that today's rally will go ahead.

Behind the scenes, Bhutto is in intense discussions with

the Bush administration to find a way out of the present political impasse. On Wednesday, the PPP leader held a private meeting with the American ambassador to Pakistan, Anne Paterson. Former US State Department official Daniel Markey told the *New York Times* yesterday that the White House was telling her to “sit tight and try to work things out and don’t do anything rash”. The newspaper also reported that Bhutto was already engaged in “back channel” discussions with the military regime.

The same *New York Times* article indicated that the US and its allies were sounding out key Pakistani generals. It noted that on two previous occasions “senior generals have asked military rulers to resign when their popularity faded and their rule was ruled as damaging to the army as a whole.... Musharraf could find himself in that position as well.” The newspaper also pointed out that General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, Musharraf’s designated successor, was now widely seen “within Western circles as a potential alternative to Musharraf”.

The essential aim of these backroom intrigues is to preserve the military-backed regime—if need be without Musharraf—and to curb the growing popular movement for democratic rights. The fear in ruling circles in Islamabad and Washington is that the discontent and anger of ordinary working people will quickly go beyond the narrow bounds set by Bhutto and other opposition leaders. In particular, Bhutto’s close relations with the Bush administration threaten to compromise her further, in a country where most people are hostile to the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even PPP sympathiser, Najam Sethi, editor-in-chief of the *Daily Times*, complained: “She’s listening to the Americans, no one else.”

The prominence of lawyers and judges in the anti-Musharraf protests reflects a shift in sentiment among sections of Pakistan’s urban middle class, who initially supported Musharraf’s coup in 1999 as the means of ending what they regarded as the corrupt governments of Nawaz Sharif and Bhutto. Cambridge-trained lawyer Athar Minallah, who served in Musharraf’s cabinet, explained to the *New York Times* that he and others were now protesting because the president had failed to keep his reform promises. “He was going to do something that had never happened before 1999: people from the ruling class would be held accountable for whatever they did,” he said.

Frustration has also built up in business circles with the vastly expanded role of the military in the economy since 1999. While Pakistan has been experiencing something of an economic boom since 2004, with investment following

into the country as a result of the regime’s free-market policies, the generals and their cronies have been the big beneficiaries.

An article in the Australian-based *Age* on Tuesday described “Pakistan’s Epaulette Empire” as “a \$US40 billion sprawl of businesses controlled by Musharraf’s comrades in the military. Controlling around 10-15 percent of the economy, the military is the biggest single stakeholder in Pakistan’s booming economy. Property, tourism, construction, transport and telecommunications, there’s barely a business sector not tinted with some sort of brass hue. The generals even own a popular breakfast cereal brand, alongside bakeries, petrol stations, farms, banks, and some listed on Karachi’s soaring stock exchange.”

Sections of the middle class are seeking more economic opportunities for themselves and an end to cronyism and corruption by establishing the rule of law. The “booming” economy, however, has only benefited a thin layer of the population. Market reforms, including privatisation and savage cuts to state subsidies and services, have hit the jobs and living standards of workers, as well as the urban and rural poor. Any sustained protest movement against Musharraf would begin to articulate these pressing social issues as well as demands for genuine democratic rights.

Like Musharraf, Bhutto is acutely aware of the political dangers to capitalist rule of a mass anti-government movement. That is why she has only reluctantly called for protests against the military regime and could, even at the last minute, call off today’s rally.



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