

Pakistani regime continues crackdown on opponents

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Arrests in Pakistan continued yesterday with the detention of opposition leader Imran Khan in the eastern city of Lahore while attending a student protest. Khan, who had been in hiding since military strongman General Pervez Musharraf imposed emergency rule on November 3, had publicly announced that he would be attending the rally to set a student protest movement in motion.

Several hundred students, chanting “Go, Musharraf, Go” and “No to Emergency!” had gathered at the University of the Punjab, one of the country’s oldest universities, to meet Khan. He was lifted into the air by students on his arrival by car, but was then apparently detained by others affiliated with the rival Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami party who handed him over to police. Khan, a former cricketer, heads the opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which he founded in 1997.

Lahore police chief Malik Mohammad Iqbal told the AFP newsagency that Khan, who is being held at an undisclosed location, would be charged under the anti-terrorism laws. “Through his speeches he has been inciting people to pick up arms, he has been calling for civil disobedience, he has been spreading hatred,” Iqbal said. In other words, any political opposition is now deemed to be part of Musharraf’s “war on terrorism” and subject to draconian penalties.

Exact figures on the number of people detained are not available. According to a *USA Today* report, police have rounded up more than 7,500 supporters of the opposition Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) of Benazir Bhutto. Ahsan Iqbal, a spokesman for the Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif said: “In the first three days, they arrested 5,000 of our supporters. Some of us are in hide-outs. The moment we go out, they pick us up. That has momentarily caused a setback.”

Many other anti-government protestors have been arrested, including lawyers and students. The private TV channels remained closed. The military regime has banned the import of satellite dishes in a bid to prevent people from accessing international TV channels. Nearly 60 percent of judges have been ousted from the Supreme Court and the High Courts in the country’s four provinces. More than half the courtrooms have no judges despite desperate measures to find replacements.

Benazir Bhutto remained under house arrest in Lahore

yesterday to prevent her from leading a planned “long march” of PPP supporters to Islamabad. Scores of heavily armed police are manning concrete and barbed wire barricades, blocking all access to the house in which Bhutto is staying. A report from the Italian newsagency AGI indicated that the march, which the authorities have declared illegal, began on Tuesday with several hundred PPP activists.

For months, Bhutto has been engaged in US-sponsored negotiations with Musharraf over a power-sharing arrangement. On Tuesday, however, the PPP leader reluctantly declared that she would not work under Musharraf and called for him to step down as president. Previously, she had only urged him to resign as army chief, end the state of emergency and call national and provincial elections by January 15.

Bhutto’s about-face is a clear recognition that her dealings with the Pakistani dictator were compromising her and the PPP in the eyes of broad layers of the population. Following the round up of PPP activists, Bhutto told *Time* magazine: “It left my party with the conclusion that he does not really want to do business with us. It made it clear that he was using us as icing on the cake to make sure no one notices the cake is poisoned.”

Yesterday Bhutto announced she would seek to form a front with other opposition parties to campaign for the restoration of democracy. PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif, who is in exile in Saudi Arabia after being prevented from returning to Pakistan in September, reacted favourably. He and other opposition parties have been sharply critical of Bhutto’s negotiations with Musharraf. Bhutto indicated on Tuesday that she would speak to Imran Khan as well as the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami and Baluchi regional parties.

Bhutto’s spokeswoman Sherry Rehman commented in the *New York Times*: “This is the logical reaction to the events of the past week and the brutal behaviour of the state. They have locked up not only her, but thousands of party workers. The whole central leadership is under house arrest.”

Bhutto is aiming to use this front of opposition parties to pressure Musharraf and appeal to the major powers, including the Bush administration, for support. At the same time, however, all the political leaders are concerned that the broad opposition to the regime’s police state methods will spiral out of their control. Above all, they fear that the involvement of

broad masses of working people will begin to raise demands for better living standards alongside democratic demands.

An article in today's *Christian Science Monitor* described the growth of student protests across Pakistan. "Students became the latest ingredient in the urban street cauldron—along with political party workers, lawyers and civil society groups—after President Musharraf extended his sweeping security crackdown to academics. The arrests of two professors from LUMS [Lahore University of Management Sciences], after the declaration of emergency last week, sparked immediate protests and the arrival of riot police at the campus gates. The agitation spread like wildfire to other smaller, private universities....

"The new movement has awakened student activism after two-decades of depoliticisation. While it remains germinal and incoherent, the students have the potential to help decide Musharraf's fate—as other movements have done in the past. As the new, non-aligned movement spreads to the traditional centres of student power, it's likely to become more complicated—both for the students and the government they oppose."

The emergence of student protests is always a harbinger of a broader politicisation among the urban and rural masses. While sections of business have done well under the Musharraf regime, the bulk of the population continues to suffer high levels of unemployment and poverty, a chronic lack of essential services and no prospect of any improvement. The longer the current political crisis continues, the more likely that layers of workers and the urban and rural poor will take to the streets.

The nervousness in international ruling circles was reflected in a comment in the London-based *Times* on Tuesday condemning Bhutto's decision to organise a "long march". Entitled "Why long march could become a wrong march", the article declared: "Of all the contributions that Benazir Bhutto might make to Pakistan's future the 'long march' she has devised, from Lahore to Islamabad, is among the most misguided. It reeks of vanity, and of recklessness towards the lives of her supporters." Bhutto had no need to demonstrate her support by engaging in such protests, the writer argued.

What concerns the *Times* is not the lives of PPP supporters, but the potential for such a march to mushroom into mass protests that slip out of Bhutto's grasp. If she were to answer, Bhutto would undoubtedly explain to the *Times* that opposition is growing already and threatens to enter dangerous waters unless she and other opposition leaders take it in hand.

The latest statements of General Musharraf will only add more fuel to the fire. In comments reported in yesterday's *New York Times*, the Pakistani president staunchly defended his imposition of emergency rule as necessary to save the country. He has announced that elections will be held by January 9 and that he intends to step down as army chief by the end of the month. But on the critical issues of emergency rule, he told the newspaper: "The emergency is to ensure elections go in an undisturbed manner."

The regime has muzzled the media, banned protests and political gatherings, gutted the courts and has opposition leaders under detention, house arrest or in exile. To even suggest that elections would be held under conditions of emergency rule makes a mockery of Musharraf's claims to be "restoring democracy". All the major opposition parties have indicated they would boycott such a poll

To date, Musharraf has been able to count on the tacit support of the major powers, above all the US. While it has criticised the emergency, the Bush administration has imposed no penalties or sanctions against the Pakistani regime, which it continues to hail as an important ally in its "war on terrorism". Pakistan is the main supply route for American occupation forces in neighbouring Afghanistan—about 75 percent of supplies either flow through or over Pakistan.

There have been a number of signs, however, that the US is casting around for an alternative to Musharraf within the Pakistani army. A Western diplomat commented to *Time* magazine: "If it becomes more and more clear that he [Musharraf] is not budging [on US demands], then certainly you start thinking of alternatives." Discontent already exists within the army over being forced to impose emergency rule. "The military does not want to be in this position. They want out of politics, and they are upset that Musharraf has placed them front and centre," the diplomat said.

US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte is due in Islamabad tomorrow. Whatever the exact nature of the talks with Musharraf, Negroponte will undoubtedly be delivering an ultimatum from the Bush administration to fix the political crisis quickly or face the consequences.



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