

Pakistan's opposition parties capitulate to Musharraf and Bush

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Pakistan's principal opposition parties and alliances—Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the Pakistan Muslim League of deposed prime minister Nawaz Sharif, and the Islamic fundamentalist Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA)—have all announced their intention to participate, and thereby legitimize, the national and provincial assembly elections the US-backed, military-dominated government has called for January 8.

These elections are a sham, meant to frustrate, not further, the democratic aspirations of the Pakistani people. Their aim is to shore up the rule of Pervez Musharraf, the military strongman and autocrat who has now recast himself as a civilian president. Even more fundamentally, they are meant to perpetuate a political system in which the military and its longtime Washington sponsors dominate decision-making, and to sustain a grossly unequal social order in which more than two-thirds of the country must eke out their existence on less than \$2 US per day.

The Musharraf regime has prepared for the elections by suspending fundamental constitutional rights for the past six weeks, under a so-called Provisional Constitution Order, and by imposing a draconian regime of press censorship and mass arrests and beatings of government opponents.

The judiciary has been purged of elements deemed unreliable by the military and their political cronies and they have re-staffed the Supreme Court with judges whose principal qualification was their willingness to give a judicial stamp of approval to Musharraf's unconstitutional October "re-election" as president and his patently illegal Provisional Constitution Order.

While Musharraf has said that he will lift the state of emergency this coming Saturday, Attorney-General Malik Mohammed Qayyum announced Thursday that before he does, he will carry out yet another dictatorial outrage—arbitrarily rewriting the constitution so as to give himself immunity from prosecution for having set aside the constitution and presided over an illegal martial law regime.

A number of prominent government opponents remain in detention or under house arrest, including sacked Supreme Court Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry and Supreme Court Bar Association President Aitzaz Ahsan.

On Tuesday, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (Pemra) issued a warning to the country's private television stations, most of which only recently resumed broadcasting, threatening them with heavy fines and their personnel, including journalists, with jail sentences of up to three years if they violate a ban on live broadcasts or violate new regulations imposed during the emergency that forbid airing "anything which defames or brings into ridicule the head of state."

The Pemra letter complained that some broadcasters were still "airing live coverage and taking live telephone calls from public which contain baseless propaganda against Pakistan and incite people to violence." It continued, "You are hereby directed to stop airing such live programmes, talk shows and content immediately."

The Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists called the Pemra order "an attempt to silence the free media" and emasculate coverage of the election campaign.

In the name of preventing terrorist attacks, the government has prohibited election processions and said that political parties must obtain official permission for rallies and other public events. And Musharraf has personally vowed to prevent political protests, especially ones directed at mobilizing popular opposition to his presidency and the sham elections.

Although Nawaz Sharif announced Sunday that his Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) will participate in the elections, neither he nor his brother, Shahbaz Nawaz, are being allowed to stand as candidates. The Election Commission has ruled them ineligible because they were convicted on various criminal charges, including treason, kidnapping and corruption, in trials organized by the military regime to justify Musharraf's 1999 coup.

Both Bhutto and Sharif have themselves repeatedly accused the regime of plotting to rig the elections. They and their parties have pointed to a whole series of anomalies: the so-called interim or caretaker government is staffed with Musharraf loyalists; local government administration, which staffs the polling stations, is firmly in the hands of supporters of the military-dominated government and its political allies, the military-sponsored Pakistan Muslim League (Q) and the MQM; and the Election Commission, which was complicit in Musharraf's phony presidential election in October, has failed to provide proper and up-to-date electoral lists.

Unquestionably the Bush administration has played a pivotal role in pressuring the opposition parties to participate in Musharraf's elections. Musharraf has long been hailed by Washington for the support he has lent the US in the so-called war on terror, that is for allowing the US to use Pakistan as a base for its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and preparations for war against Iran.

While the Bush administration criticized Musharraf for imposing emergency rule, it has also made repeatedly clear its strong support for him remaining president. Even as Musharraf was presiding over mass detentions and making civilians subject to military courts, George W. Bush was stoutly defending him as the Pakistani leader who has done the most to advance his country toward democracy!

Washington hopes the sham elections will provide greater international and domestic legitimacy for a military-dominated government and expects that a politically strengthened government in Islamabad will be better able to do the US's bidding in suppressing pro-Taliban elements in Pakistan. (The military's counter-insurgency war in Pakistan's traditional tribal belt, in which large numbers of civilians have been killed, has not only been widely criticized in Pakistan, but has caused considerable dissension in the army, especially among Pashtun troops.)

In recent weeks, the US Ambassador to Pakistan Anne Patterson has been doing the rounds, meeting Bhutto, Sharif, Maulana Fazlur Rehman (a leader of one component of the MMA), and others to urge them not to boycott the elections.

Bhutto has made it clear for months that she is prepared to do a deal with Musharraf, under the sponsorship of Washington, for decades the

principal prop of military rule in Pakistan. However the increasing unpopularity of the regime and its flagrant attacks on democratic rights, culminating in the imposition of the emergency rule and the arrest of many PPP supporters, has made it impossible for her to cement such a partnership.

Bowing to Washington's wishes, Bhutto has in recent weeks spearheaded a campaign to isolate those calling for a boycott of the January 8 elections. She has justified participating in the elections on the grounds that a boycott would allow Musharraf's cronies to win uncontested. But in arguing against a boycott, as earlier in justifying her rapprochement with Musharraf, Bhutto has repeatedly raised her fear that a popular agitation against the government could escape the control of the PPP and the political establishment.

Sharif, because of his personal animosity to Musharraf and his longstanding ties to sections of the Islamicist right whom Washington deems insufficiently supportive of the US occupation of Afghanistan, initially did not figure in the Bush administration's plans to recalibrate the Musharraf regime so as to give it greater legitimacy. But it is surely not coincidental that Sharif, who since returning to Pakistan late last month had hedged on whether his party would champion an election boycott, announced that his party will in fact participate in the elections shortly after meeting with the Saudi ambassador.

The Saudi royal family, which, like the Pakistani military, has long been a pillar of US foreign policy, hosted Sharif after he went into exile.

Sharif has justified his party's rallying to the elections on the grounds that the PPP's participation would render a boycott ineffective. The truth is the two parties are ferocious rivals. Sharif was a protégé of General Zia, the dictator who ordered Bhutto's father—the founder of the PPP, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto—hanged; Bhutto welcomed Musharraf's 1999 coup against Sharif. Each party fears that the other will cut a deal with Musharraf and the military at its expense.

Traditionally the PML (N), an openly rightwing party, has had much closer ties to the military than the PPP, which in the past has postured as a socialist party and to this day tries to give itself popular legitimacy by pointing to the repression its members and leaders suffered under the Zia regime.

But with the PPP having been actively promoted over the past year by the Bush administration as a partner for Musharraf, the PML (N) has found it politic to portray itself as the more determined opponent of the current military-dominated government.

Last week the two parties made a show of staging unity talks, with the claim that they wanted to reach a joint stand on the elections. Predictably these talks foundered, with the principal differences said to be whether they should champion and make a condition of participating in the elections the restoration of the purged judges and when to launch an agitation against the regime.

Bhutto has shied away from demanding the reinstatement of the purged judges. She knows full well that Musharraf has been adamant that there can be no compromise on this issue, for it would reopen the question of the constitutionality of his election as president till 2012, and that Washington has all but publicly given its blessing to Musharraf's judicial purge. Even while calling on Musharraf to lift the emergency when possible and give up his post as head of the armed forces, not once did the Bush administration urge him to restore the purged judges.

The PML (N), by contrast, has announced that it will make the restoration of the judges—who until recently were quite content to work under the dictatorship and many of whom sanctioned Musharraf's coup and other unconstitutional acts—the sole point in its election campaign. By striking this pose of intransigence the PML (N) is trying to tap into the groundswell of anti-Musharraf sentiment. According to an opinion poll carried out by the US Republican Party's International Republican Institute—that is by elements favorable to the Musharraf regime—67 percent

of Pakistanis believe Musharraf should resign as president immediately and 70 percent don't believe the government deserves to be re-elected.

Focusing exclusively on the purged judges is a convenient way for the PML (N) leaders to avoid any discussion of their right-wing socio-economic program.

The measure of the PML (N)'s opposition to the current regime is demonstrated by its signaling that it is ready to take back into its leadership members who defected to the pro-Musharraf party. The PML (Q), as its name suggests, is in fact largely made up of former members of Sharif's party.

Lawyer groups who have spearheaded the opposition to Musharraf since he launched his first attempt to oust Chief Justice Chaudhry in March are continuing to agitate for an election boycott. According to press reports about a thousand lawyers staged a protest Thursday in Lahore, the largest city in the Punjab, and a further 800 marched in Multan to demand the reinstatement of the purged judges and a boycott of the election.

Otherwise only a collection of smaller parties, including the Islamic fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islami and the Pakistan Tehrik-i-Insaf of former cricket star Imran Khan, remain committed to boycotting an election being carried out under conditions in which public debate is largely controlled and suppressed and whose purpose is to legitimize a military-controlled government, headed by a president who effectively twice staged military coups.

The PPP and PML (N) are suggesting that after the elections they will take action against Musharraf, whether through parliament by virtue of their having secured an "anti-Musharraf" majority or in the streets if the government and military intelligence agencies rig the polls.

No one should give any credence to such claims. The conflict between the PML (N), PPP and Musharraf revolves around access to the state's powers of patronage and the military's monopolization of much of the benefits of Pakistan's recent capitalist expansion.

But even should they try to ease Musharraf from power, participating in the elections is the bourgeois establishment parties' way of signaling to the military and Washington that they are working to contain the popular opposition to the government and the denial of basic civil liberties within the existing anti-democratic state structures. At the very most, they want a recalibration of the regime, changing the balance in political power between the military and the politicians, while keeping Pakistan firmly allied to the US.

Far from seeking democracy, Bhutto and Sharif want to prevent the entry of the masses into political life and to prevent the raising of any demands that call into question the military-security state apparatus or the Pakistani bourgeoisie's alliance with US imperialism. Above all they are determined to prevent a head-on confrontation between a mobilized populace and the military, which they no less than Musharraf recognize is the bulwark of their privileges—of the Pakistani state and of capitalist private property.

Indeed, Pakistan's explosive socio-economic situation—the growth of social inequality over the past decade as the result of neo-liberal policies and an influx of foreign capital and the recent sharp rise in inflation and the development of shortages of essential commodities such as flour—have only made the bourgeois opposition parties more apprehensive about sanctioning any protest movement. Their fear is that even an agitation limited to boycotting the government's phony elections could provide a point of entry into political struggle for Pakistan's toiling masses, above all the working class.



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