Pakistani regime announces lengthy election delay

K. Ratnayake
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The Pakistani government of President Pervez Musharraf yesterday announced that national elections planned for January 8 would be postponed for six weeks until February 18. The delay, which was criticised by opposition parties, is a desperate attempt to shore up the military regime amid the deepening political turmoil that followed last Thursday's assassination of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto.

In a televised address to the nation, Musharraf defended the decision, saying: "We are in great danger at the moment. The political parties shouldn't increase those dangers." He warned against any political agitation and ordered the arrest of all those involved in rioting over the past week. The president confirmed that the army would be deployed "during and after elections". He stressed that "free, fair, transparent... and peaceful... elections" were necessary.

Musharraf also announced that British police from Scotland Yard would be involved in the investigation of Bhutto's murder. The government's extraordinary claim that Bhutto died, not from gunshot wounds, but when she hit her head on a lever on the sun roof of the car in which she was riding, has only compounded the widespread belief among Pakistanis that the regime was involved either directly or indirectly in her death. If a gunman was involved, the murder did not readily fit Al Qaeda's modus operandi as alleged by the regime.

Musharraf again blamed Al Qaeda for Bhutto's assassination, a claim based on one undisclosed intelligence intercept the day after the murder. Speaking to the *New York Times*, a Pentagon official expressed scepticism saying Bhutto had other enemies including other Islamist groups. "There are so many people who'd want to kill her, it's difficult to ascribe any one agency," he said. What was not mentioned, however, was that sections of the military and the government, which have a long association with Islamic extremists, also have the means and the motive for killing Bhutto.

An article in McClatchy Newspapers on Monday revealed that Bhutto had been due to meet two US senators, on the day she died, to hand over a report accusing the military's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of planning to fix the elections in favour of the ruling Pakistani Muslim League-Q (PML-Q). Safraz Khan Lashari, from Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), described the report as "very sensitive", saying that the PPP had wanted to share it with trusted US politicians, rather than the Bush administration.

Lashari said the report, which was compiled with the aid of Pakistani intelligence sources, alleged that the ISI had set up a special unit based in a safe house in central Islamabad to run the rigging operation. It named recently a retired brigadier general from the ISI as the man in charge of the unit and claimed that US aid money was involved. Ballots favouring the PML-Q were being produced in advance to influence the outcome in marginal seats.

CNN, which claimed to have seen a copy of the report, added that the unit was planning violent incidents to disrupt voting in safe opposition areas. It was also using US communications equipment. "Ninety percent of the equipment that the USA gave the government of Pakistan to fight terrorism is being used to monitor and to keep a check on their political opponents," the report stated.

These latest revelations confirm that the elections were never going to be "free and fair". Musharraf only announced the original January 8 poll after imposing a state of emergency throughout the country and purging the judiciary to ensure there would be no legal or constitutional challenge to his reelection as president. He used the emergency decree to impose censorship measures and restrictions on political activity that remain in force. The six-week delay sets the precedent for further postponements if anti-government unrest continues and raises questions as to whether the deeply compromised poll will be held at all.

US support

The beleaguered Pakistani regime is heavily dependent on

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the Bush administration's continued backing. Musharraf has been a key political ally in the US-led occupation of Afghanistan and for Washington's broader ambitions to dominate the resource rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. Having initially pushed for the election to go ahead on schedule, the White House yesterday supported the lengthy delay. Spokeswoman Dana Perino declared that "the important thing is that they have a date certain". She dismissed a reporter's suggestion the election might not be "free and fair".

For months, the Bush administration sought to broker an agreement between Musharraf and Bhutto, in which the latter would head a new civilian government in exchange for allowing the former to remain as president. The deal was aimed at ensuring that Musharraf and the military retained control of the key levers of power while maintaining the pretence of a return to democratic, civilian rule. Following Bhutto's assassination, the US has been working flat out behind the scenes to prop up the regime.

The *New York Times* reported yesterday that the FBI had had a team of forensic experts on stand-by to fly to Pakistan to investigate Bhutto's murder. Given the widespread anti-US sentiment, however, the use of the FBI to try to restore credibility to the Musharraf regime's own inquiry was likely to backfire. As a US official explained, sending British specialists from Scotland Yard would be less likely to inflame tensions in Pakistan.

Musharraf is also reliant on the opposition parties themselves to contain political hostility. While critical of the announced delay, the two major parties—the PPP and the Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif—have both indicated that they will take part in the election on February 18, thus lending legitimacy to this democratic charade. Musharraf ousted Sharif in a military coup in 1999.

PPP information secretary Sherry Rehman dismissed the official explanation that the postponement had been made necessary by the damage caused to election offices by rioting. Even according to the Election Commission, only 11 of 114 throughout the country had been affected. "In a country like Pakistan, delays always become an excuse to manipulate the election in favour of the incumbents," Rehman warned. "They have enough time. It's not about lacking the ability—it's a question of lacking the will."

However, Bhutto's husband, Asif Ali Zardari, immediately signalled that the PPP would take part in the election and would not seek confrontation. Zardari and his son Bilawal Bhutto were appointed as new the PPP's co-leaders last weekend—underscoring the dynastic and anti-democratic character of the party. While it makes populist appeals to the poor, the PPP, which was founded by Benazir Bhutto's father, represents layers of the Pakistani bourgeoisie. The Bhuttos are themselves one of the wealthy landowning families in Sindh province.

Far from mobilising party's supporters against the Musharraf regime, the PPP has acted as a brake on the development of political opposition. In warning the Musharraf regime against rigging the election, Zardari declared: "Fear the day when our hearts are torn apart and I won't be able to control the party workers." The remarks sum up the PPP's attitude: while pressing for a greater share of power, it is just as fearful as the military regime of the eruption of mass sentiment.

Sharif was also caustic about the election delay, saying: "It is the requirement of the Q league and General Musharraf to get these elections postponed because their rigging plans are falling apart." He rejected the Election Commission's statement as an excuse saying polls could have been held on schedule with a short delay in those areas affected by rioting. But the PML-N has dropped plans for a boycott and has indicated that it will participate in the election.

Musharraf and opposition leaders are well aware that hostility to the military regime has the potential to spiral out of their control. Over the past week, the country's security forces have not hesitated to use force to crack down on the protests and riots that followed Bhutto's murder. At least 58 persons have died, in some cases when police and soldiers fired into crowds of protesters.

The ruling elites are concerned that anger over the assassination will take on broader political aims including demands for genuine democratic reform and improved living standards. The political crisis has already impacted on the economy with the Karachi Stock Exchange benchmark 100-share index slumping by 9.6 percent since Monday amid warnings that investors will pull out of Pakistan. Any economic decline will only exacerbate the deep social divide between rich and poor—one third of the population lives below the poverty line of less than $US1 a day. Prices for some essential items, such as vegetables, doubled over the past week amid fears of a transport breakdown and shortages.

Far from quelling the country's acute social and political tensions, the election delay and its tacit acceptance by the major opposition parties has only added more fuel to the fire.

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