

Mounting calls from Pakistan's military and judicial establishments for Musharraf to quit

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2 February 2008

More than two hundred retired high-ranking Pakistani military officers have unanimously demanded that the country's president, Pervez Musharraf, resign and hand over his powers to deposed Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry, so he can form a "neutral care-taker government" to supervise national elections.

Organized in the Pakistan Ex-Servicemen Association, the officers—who include army generals, admirals, air marshals, and at least one former head of Pakistan's military—met in Islamabad, Thursday.

Former Air Force Chief Asghar Khan, who presided over the meeting, later told a press conference that Musharraf should "hand over powers to Justice Chaudhry who is still constitutional chief justice" so as "to save the country from worsening political turmoil."

Chaudhry and some 60 other supreme and high court judges were arbitrarily purged by Musharraf when he imposed de facto martial law last November 3.

Khan dismissed the national and provincial assembly elections Musharraf has promised for February 18 as a sham. "We don't recognize any electoral process under Musharraf and present Election Commission ... Any polls under Musharraf will not be free and fair." He said that the anti-Musharraf generals are urging another purged supreme court justice, Rana Bhagwandas, be appointed election commissioner.

Khan said the retired officers had yet to decide what they would do to press their demand for Musharraf's resignation, but said they would join the protest planned by the country's lawyers for February 5. Despite oftentimes savage repression, the lawyers have for months been protesting against the military regime's attempts to bully the courts into giving a judicial stamp of approval to Musharraf's latest attempts to subvert the constitution and perpetuate his rule. On Thursday, thousands of lawyers again took to the streets in Islamabad and the four provincial capitals to demand the restoration of the sacked judges.

Khan was flanked at the press conference by former Army Chief Mirza Aslam Beg. Beg, who headed the military from 1988 to 1991, presided over the transition to an elected civilian government following the 1988 assassination of Pakistan's then military dictator, General Zia ul-Haq.

According to the *Dawn*, Beg claimed he had been contacted by the governments of seven countries since last week when the Ex-Servicemen's Association published a letter signed by a hundred retired officers calling on Musharraf to step down.

Others who have lent support to the anti-Musharraf campaign include Gen. Hameed Gul—an ex-chief of Pakistan's most important

intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence Agency, notorious for his close connections to the Islamic right—and General Faiz Ali Chishti who, like Air Marshal Asghar Khan, was a close associate of the dictator General Zia.

Musharraf, who was on a European tour when the retired officers issued their open letter, dismissed it, saying its signatories were persons of no importance in contemporary Pakistan.

But the repeated calls from officers who held the highest positions in the Pakistani military points to the emergence of significant fissures within the institution that has constituted far and away Musharraf's most important base of support since he seized power in a military coup in 1999.

Only with great reluctance, under heavy domestic and international pressure, and after having carried out a series of flagrant violations of the constitution, culminating in the Nov. 3 imposition of de facto martial law, did Musharraf step down as head of Pakistan's armed services in mid-December.

The officer corps has benefited handsomely from the past eight years of military rule, gorging on the \$10 billion in aid money the US has supplied since September 2001 and using their control of government to seize land and steer contracts to themselves and their political and business cronies.

But the retired officers recognize that the military faces a hostile populace and a deepening economic and political crisis that threatens the privileged position of the officer corps within the Pakistani state and potentially the unity and integrity of the Pakistani state, whose principal institutions, including the military, have long been dominated by a tiny Punjabi elite.

Polls have shown that a majority of Pakistanis blame the military, their political allies or their paymasters in Washington for the assassination of Pakistan People's party leader Benazir Bhutto last December 27. Moreover, Bhutto's murder was followed by a wave of demonstrations and riots that convulsed the country for three days.

While Musharraf has boasted that his regime has presided over unprecedented economic growth, poverty and economic insecurity have grown dramatically. Several years of galloping food prices, have in recent weeks turned into flour and wheat shortages raising the possibility of food riots.

Moreover, the Musharraf regime is reviled for its mercenary activities in support of the US invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. The military's heavy-handed attempts to crush support for insurgents opposed to the puppet government in Afghanistan who have found refuge in the Pashtun-speaking border area has provoked much opposition within the military, including widespread desertions of rank-and-file soldiers.

The day before the retired generals' meeting, the sacked chief justice, who has been under house arrest since November 3, issued an open letter to European leaders, World Economic Forum head Klaus Schwab, and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Because of the continuing restrictions on his movements and activities the letter had to be smuggled out.

Chaudhry said he was compelled to respond to the lies and calumnies Musharraf had directed against him when trying to justify before European audiences last fall's six-week suspension of the constitution and the purging of the judiciary.

In his letter Chaudhry recapitulated how Musharraf had resorted to emergency rule so as to preempt the court's ruling on the constitutionality of his stage-managed re-election to a further 5-year presidential term.

He also rebutted the corruption charges that the regime brought against him when it first tried to remove him last March—charges that Musharraf continues to trumpet although they were dismissed by the supreme court last July. "The Supreme Court," writes Chudhry, "found that the evidence submitted against me by the government was so obviously fabricated and incorrect that the bench took the unprecedented step of fining the government Rs100,000 ... for filing clearly false and malicious documents as well as revoking the licence to practice of the Advocate on Record for filing false documents."

Chaudhry chastized western governments for backing a ruler who not only has refused to abide by the law, but has purged the courts so as to appoint judges loyal to him personally.

Declares Chaudhry, "Is there a precedent in history, all history, of 60 judges, including three Chief Justices (of the Supreme Court and two of Pakistan's four High Courts), being dismissed, arrested and detained at the whim of one man? I have failed to discover any such even in medieval times under any emperor, king, or sultan, or even when a dictator has had full military sway over any country in more recent times. But this incredible outrage has happened in the 21st century at the hands of an extremist General out on a 'charm offensive' of western capitals and one whom the west supports."

Chaudhry was himself for years a loyal handraiser for the military regime. He did issue several judgments that cut across the military regime's objectives, blocking the sweetheart deal under which Pakistan Steel Mills was to be privatized and ordering the military to produce alleged terrorist suspects whom it had disappeared, but as he himself has admitted, he only soured on Musharraf when the general sought to remove him last March because he deemed him insufficiently compliant.

Chaudhry clearly hopes to use the popularity he has gained by defying Musharraf to help re-stabilize bourgeois rule, in league with the bourgeois opposition, the PPP, but also Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (Sharif). A party of businessmen and landlords that historically was patronized by the military, the PML (Nawaz) is trying to boost its popularity by making the judges issue the focus of its election campaign. The PPP, in deference to Washington's wishes, by contrast, has downplayed the judges issue, for restoring the purged judges would preclude any power-sharing deal with Musharraf.

The Bush administration has strongly supported Musharraf through thick and thin, including turning a blind-eye to his sacking of the judges, excusing his imposition of martial law, and denying from the get-go any suggestion the military regime could have had a hand in Bhutto's assassination. But Washington has been trying to prod Pakistan's dictator into making a deal with the bourgeois opposition, particularly the PPP, so as to give the military-dominated government

a democratic facade.

Pakistan is crucial to the US occupation of Afghanistan and also figures large in US plans for military action against its western neighbor Iran.

Within Washington there is a bi-partisan consensus in favor of sustaining and expanding the five decades-old partnership between the Pentagon and the Pakistani military that has seen the US support and finance of successive Pakistani dictatorships. But there is concern that the Bush administration has mismanaged US interests, as in Iraq, in this case by clinging too closely to the dictator Musharraf.

At a House of Representatives hearing January 30, several Congressmen, Republican and Democrat, expressed fears that a patently rigged election could lead to an eruption of anti-government protests.

Said Congressman Chris Shays, "What happened in Kenya strikes me as very likely to happen in Pakistan, and I don't know how to we respond to it." Betty McCollum, a Democrat, also expressed great concern about a rigged election triggering popular unrest. "I'm very concerned about a breakdown and the effect it would have on regional stability."

John Tierney, the committee's Democratic chairman, said the US had given "a mixed and muddled message" about the need for free and fair elections. He said the issue was not whether the election would be tainted. "The only question is how tainted will this election be," he said. "This administration seems content just to boot the ball down the road and deal with the aftermath, and I think that is a disturbing thing."

The previous day in an appearance on Capitol Hill, Richard Boucher, Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, had defended the administration's policy of support for Musharraf and the regime's bogus February 18 elections.

He dismissed calls for the restoration of the sacked judges, declaring, "Our view is that the issue of an independent judiciary can't be solved that simply."

He admitted the regime was likely to engage in electoral fraud, but only to try to lend legitimacy to a process that is an utter perversion of democracy, since it was "prepared" by a six-week emergency used to illegally install Musharraf as president till 2012, purge the judiciary, and impose new curbs on the press.

Said Boucher, "We don't necessarily accept a certain level of fraud, but if history is any guide and current reports are any guide, we should expect some ... On a scale from terrible to great, it'll be somewhere in the middle."



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