Pakistan’s military regime stages sham election

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The elections for Pakistan’s national and provincial assemblies that are to be held today make a mockery of the most elementary democratic principles. They have been organized by the military-controlled government of President Pervez Musharraf, with the backing of the Bush administration, so as to throttle, not further, the democratic aspirations of Pakistan’s toilers.

The opposition parties have for months been warning that the military-intelligence apparatus and its cronies in the Pakistan Muslim League (Q) are planning to rig the elections, just as they did those held in 2002.

“This is not going to be a free and fair election,” said Sherry Rehman, spokeswoman for the Pakistan People’s Party, Sunday. “We have improvised polling stations coming up in the last few days. We have firing on our rallies.”

Benazir Bhutto, a two-time prime minister and the prime ministerial candidate of the PPP, the country’s largest opposition party, was assassinated on December 27, just hours before she was to present a group of visiting US lawmakers with evidence that the ruling clique was planning massive electoral fraud.

The election commission has barred Nawaz Sharif and Shahbaz Sharif, the principal leaders of the other major opposition party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), from contesting the elections.

Terrorist attacks have repeatedly targeted election campaign events. Strangely—or rather not so strangely given the longstanding ties between Pakistan’s military-intelligence apparatus and the Taliban and other Islamic fundamentalist militias—these attacks have almost entirely spared the parties that support Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 military coup and subsequently became a key US ally in the “war on terror.”

Forty-seven people are now said to have died as the result of a suicide-bomb attack Saturday on a PPP rally in Parachinar in Pakistan’s tribal belt.

A spokesman for the Awami National Party (ANP) has blamed the military for a bomb blast that killed 30 people attending an ANP election meeting February 10 in Charsadda in the North-West Frontier Province. “We blame security agencies for the attack,” said Zahid Khan of the ANP, a party that derives much of its support from Pakistan’s Pashtun minority. “The agencies want to create civil war and want to support dictatorship,”

Musharraf prepared for what he has called his regime’s “third and final step” in the “transition to democracy,” by imposing martial law November 3. The six-week emergency was used by Musharraf to terrorize the opposition, impose permanent and draconian curbs on the press, and purge the top levels of the judiciary of anyone deemed insufficiently pliant.

More than two months later, several leading oppositionists, including Aitzaz Ahsan, a prominent PPP activist and the president of the Pakistani Supreme Court Bar Association, remain in jail or under house arrest.

Police and the private militias of pro-government landlords are reported to have threatened and harassed large numbers of opposition candidates and their supporters.

Journalists, meanwhile, routinely face Anti-Terrorism charges or the threat of such charges. According to Human Rights Watch, “After the assassination of Benazir Bhutto ... cases under the act were registered against dozens of journalists in the southern province of Sindh.” Journalists in rural areas have been especially targeted for harassment. “[T]hey have been repeatedly threatened by police and powerful local figures,” reports HRW, “prevented from covering news stories or events, such as protest rallies, had their equipment confiscated, and been warned that they face arrest if they record or air footage deemed undesirable by the government.”

On Saturday, police used tear gas and baton-charges to break up a rally in Quetta organized by the All Parties Democratic Movement (APDM), a coalition of smaller parties that is advocating an election boycott.

Musharraf’s new, hand-picked Supreme Court, which quickly gave its blessing to his patently illegal “re-election” as president October 6, will be the ultimate official arbiter of the validity of the election results.

The ground-level organization of the vote is in the hands of an election commission that has repeatedly demonstrated its subservience to Musharraf, a national “caretaker” government staffed with PML (Q) cronies, and local administrations led by Musharraf allies.

A PPP leader says his party has identified more than one hundred pro-Musharraf candidates who are closely related to those charged with running the elections in their electoral constituencies. “They will use government machinery, government finances and government funds,” PPP Senator Enver Beg told the BBC. “... They have the police under their control.”

In the name of preventing terrorist attacks, 80,000 Pakistani troops and some 400,000 police are to be deployed at polling stations and other strategic points across the country.

Yet so shaky and desperate is the regime that it cannot be said with certainty, just hours before the voting is scheduled to begin, that the sham elections will proceed.

Musharraf has angrily denounced opinion polls that show that the PPP and PML (N) together enjoy the support of substantially more than half of Pakistanis, that the PML (Q) has the support of no more than 15 percent of voters, and that an overwhelming majority wants Musharraf to quit. The pollsters, said Musharraf, are “playing with the peace of the world.”

Information Minister Nisar Memon, meanwhile, has vowed that the government will crush any protests against the sham elections: “We have security arrangements to deal with them sternly.”

Many foreign groups have refused to monitor the elections because of the patently undemocratic conditions under which they are being held. The US Republican Party’s International Republican Institute pulled out of election monitoring after Pakistani authorities said it was forbidden to conduct exit polls.

The European Union has sent a small number of observers and several leading US Democratic Party politicians, including Senators Joe Biden and John Kerry, will be on hand. They will be monitoring a miniscule

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fraction of the 60,000-plus polling stations.

Even the Bush administration, which has repeatedly praised the dictator Musharraf as a dedicated democrat, concedes that there will be widespread electoral fraud. US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Richard Boucher recently told a US Congressional committee, "On a scale from terrible to great, it'll be somewhere in the middle."

The Bush administration has defended Musharraf through thick and thin, including conniving in his imposition of martial law and purge of the judiciary three months ago. Earlier this month, Boucher said Musharraf would be within his rights as president to disband the newly elected national assembly should it seek to impeach him.

But for the past year Washington has been seeking to give Pakistan's military-dominated regime a "democratic" face-lift, because it recognizes the current government faces mass opposition and in virtually all sections of society. Musharraf's staunch support for the Bush administration's predatory wars in Afghanistan and Iraq has riled the population, which is well aware of Washington's role in sustaining a succession of military dictatorships in Islamabad. The Musharraf regime claims to have presided over unprecedented economic growth, but its neo-liberal policies have produced increasing poverty and economic insecurity for the majority of Pakistanis. In recent weeks, the country has been rocked by food and fuel shortages. Sections of the bourgeois elite are angered by the extent to which the military and its cronies have monopolized both political power and the profits from Pakistan's recent capitalist growth. One expression of this is the growth of regional tensions within the Pakistani state, in particular the re-emergence of a nationalist insurgency in Baluchistan.

The Bush administration and indeed the entire US political establishment view the Pentagon's decades-long intimate alliance with the Pakistani military as pivotal to US interests and ambitions in Central Asia and the Middle East. In recent weeks, as Pakistan has been buffeted by crisis, a parade of top US military and intelligence officials have gone to Islamabad to discuss increased cooperation between the US and Pakistani militaries, aimed, in the first instance, at suppressing armed opponents of the US occupation of Afghanistan operating in Pakistan.

Washington is anxious for the military to remain the dominant force in Pakistan's government, but calculates that this can be best accomplished by it ceding a measure of power to the traditional political parties.

Toward this end, the Bush administration spent much of 2007 trying to engineer a rapprochement between Musharraf and Bhutto and her PPP.

Bhutto was more than willing to oblige. But a power-sharing deal could never be cemented because of opposition from sections of the government and military, including Musharraf himself, and because the political dynamics kept changing as popular opposition to the government swelled.

The PPP broke a tenuous alliance with Sharif's PML (N) and facilitated Musharraf's phony election as president, while the regime adopted a National Reconciliation Ordinance giving Bhutto and other PPP leaders amnesty from corruption charges. Yet the very day of her return to Pakistan from almost a decade in exile, Bhutto was the target of an assassination attempt, for which she held elements in and around the government responsible.

The Bush administration's plans for a recalibrated Musharraf-led regime were further thrown askew by his having to resort to martial law to quash the constitutional challenge to his phony re-election and then by Bhutto's murder—a murder which the regime has blamed on the Taliban, but which a majority of Pakistanis believe was orchestrated by the military, PML (Q) leaders, and/or Washington.

The Bush administration is now hoping to use the sham elections as a mechanism to bring the PPP and possibly the PML (N) into a new relationship with the military.

Boucher's claim that there will be a middling level of fraud indicates that the Bush administration expects and is willing to countenance Musharraf and the military manipulating the results. But it is hoping to prevail upon them to see the wisdom of allowing the PPP its status as the country's largest party and some share of governmental power and patronage.

Significantly, Associated Press cited Sunday an unnamed Western diplomat as arguing that the opinion polls had understated the electoral support Musharraf's allies will receive. "One Western diplomat said the pro-Musharraf party still retains the support of many powerful landowning families in Punjab, the most populous province and the key electoral battleground. Poor farmers traditionally follow the advice of their landlords on how to vote—regardless of personal views.

"The diplomat, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of commenting on Pakistani affairs, predicted that the two opposition parties would fall short of enough seats to form a government and that the country could end up with a broad coalition possibly including the ruling party—a move that would block any move to impeach Musharraf."

The PPP and the PML (N) have both threatened to launch mass protests against any election-rigging. But over the last six years they have made countless threats to launch a popular movement against the Musharraf regime. The reality is the two parties speak for rival factions of the Pakistani bourgeoisie and as such are acutely aware that the military is the bulwark of their class privileges and the integrity of the Pakistani state. They rightly fear that any intervention of Pakistani masses into the political situation could quickly spin out of their control, resulting in the raising of demands that broaden the call for democracy to include socio-economic demands and the breaking of the US-Pakistani military-security nexus, and expose the deep class cleavages within the military itself.

The PML (N) has made a great show of insisting that it will never work with Musharraf and of demanding that the sacked Supreme and High court judges be reinstated. In part this is because of the intense personal animosity that exists between Sharif and Musharraf, who deposed him. A second factor is the need for the PML (N), an avowedly right-wing party with the close ties to both the military establishment and the religious right, to burnish its popular credentials. Sharif, the scion of a family of industrialists, began his political career as a protégé of the last military dictator before Musharraf, General Zia al-Haq. If the pro-Musharraf party is called the PML (Q) it is because the majority of its members and leaders are defectors from Sharif's party. Indeed, in recent weeks, while castigating Musharraf as a dictator, Sharif has been welcoming back into his party a goodly number of these erstwhile Musharraf allies.

The PPP, now led in dynastic-fashion by Benazir Bhutto's husband Asif Ali Zardari (until their son is ready to assume his "inheritance"), has focused its election campaign all but entirely on Bhutto's "martyrdom," the better to avoid any discussion of its program.

The PPP describes itself as the party of the poor. But the first PPP government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, its "socialist" rhetoric notwithstanding, quickly came into violent conflict with the working class. The governments Benazir Bhutto led in the late 1980s and 1990s imposed IMF-style austerity policies. The PPP election manifesto boasts of its commitment to export-led growth and its role in pioneering privatization and other pro-big business measures.

Zardari and the PPP leadership have been careful not to rule out a post-election deal with Musharraf. Zardari has repeatedly said he will determine whether he can work with the autocrat Musharraf based on the "fairness" of the elections, in other words how many seats the military-dominated regime allows to be allotted to the PPP. Speaking Sunday, the PPP head called for national unity, i.e., some type of political arrangement to be forged with the military and their US sponsors. Said Zardari, "I think we have reached the breaking point where if we don't band together we will lose this great nation which we call Pakistan today."

Sixty years of Pakistani independence have conclusively demonstrated that the venal national bourgeoisie is hostile to democracy and utterly

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incapable of resolving any of the burning social problems that confront the country's toiling masses.

Democracy in Pakistan will not be won in alliance with the PPP, PML, and various other political parties of the bourgeoisie, but only by the working class placing itself at the head of the toiling masses and linking the struggle for democratic rights with a challenge to Pakistan's reactionary socio-economic order.

Genuine democracy requires the liquidation of landlordism, the dismantling of the US sponsored military-security state, the separation of mosque from state, socialist measures to provide jobs and a secure income for all, and the overthrow of the communal state system that imperialism imposed on South Asia, with the connivance of the Indian National Congress and Muslim League, in 1947-48. It will be realized only in the form of a workers' and peasants' government that consciously links the fate of the toilers of Pakistan and South Asia to the international working class' struggle to put an end to capitalism.

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