

Instability continues in Pakistan following formation of coalition government

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After weeks of factional maneuvering, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) announced Sunday an agreement to form a national coalition government.

Pakistan's principal parties have been excluded from any share of power since Pervez Musharraf, the country's president and until mid-December the head of Pakistan's armed services, seized power in an October 1999 coup. But as a result of elections last month, the PPP and the PML-N now dominate the National Assembly and the legislatures of the country's two main provinces, the Punjab and Sind.

Central to the PPP-PML-N accord is a vow to pass, within 30 days of the convening of the National Assembly, a resolution restoring to the country's supreme and provincial high courts 60 judges purged last November after Musharraf imposed martial law.

Musharraf has repeatedly declared that any attempt to restore the purged judges would be illegal and has denounced deposed Supreme Court Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry as "the scum of the earth."

Last month's electoral rout of the pro-Musharraf party created by Pakistan's military and intelligence services, the Pakistan Muslim League (Q), stunned the Bush administration. For the past seven years, it has touted Musharraf as an "indispensable ally" in the "war on terror." The US has provided massive political, military, and economic support to Pakistan's military-dominated regime.

A major factor in the long interval between the initial post-election declaration by the PPP and PML-N leaderships of a political partnership and Sunday's PPP-PML-N accord was pressure from Washington. The Bush administration is leery of the PML-N, because its leader, Nawaz Sharif, is hostile to Musharraf, who deposed him as prime minister in 1999. In the three weeks since the February 18 elections, Bush administration officials have strongly urged the PPP to include the remnants of the pro-Musharraf party in a PPP-led national coalition government and pressed both the PPP and PML-N to work with Musharraf in the name of "national reconciliation."

These efforts continue. The US Ambassador to Pakistan Anne Patterson met with PPP chairman Asif Ali Zardari Monday for the third time since the elections. Zardari is the husband of assassinated PPP leader and former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto.

Joe Biden, the head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and other leading Democrats have also urged Pakistan's traditional major parties "not to dwell on the past"—that is, they should allow the autocrat Musharraf to continue to play a central role in Pakistan's governance.

As a result of constitutional changes orchestrated by Musharraf and the military, the president appoints the heads of Pakistan's armed services, has the power to fire the prime minister and to dissolve the National Assembly, and chairs a military-dominated National Security

Council that wields wide power over government policy.

Last Thursday, soon after receiving US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman, Admiral Michael Mullen, Musharraf's successor as the head of Pakistan's armed forces, General Ashfaq Kayani made a speech to corps commanders in which he denied claims that there has been a "distancing of the army from the president."

Kiyani's speech, which was summarized for the press, said the military is committed to "play[ing] its constitutional role in support of the elected government" and aspires to no political role. But Kiyani also emphasized the military's commitment to the National Command Structure (NCS)—which places the military under the president's authority—and proclaimed that "any kind of schism, at any level, under the circumstances would not be in the larger interest of the nation."

A National Assembly resolution that orders the purged judges restored would represent a direct challenge to the legitimacy and legality of Musharraf's presidency, since his aim in purging the judiciary was to install pliant judges who would uphold the results of last October's bogus presidential election. Restoring the judges to the bench would raise the prospect that the many constitutional challenges to Musharraf's "reelection" as president would be reopened. It could also pave the way for legal cases arguing that Musharraf's suspension of the constitution last November—an action even he concedes was "extra-constitutional"—was illegal, if not treasonous.

The passing of such a resolution would in all likelihood result in a constitutional crisis since Musharraf and his allies have declared that the National Assembly cannot restore the purged judges through a mere resolution. Before ending the six-week "emergency," Musharraf unilaterally rewrote the constitution to sanction all measures taken under his martial law regime.

The judges can be restored to the bench, or so claim Musharraf and his supporters, only by an amendment to the constitution. A constitutional amendment must obtain the support of two-thirds of the National Assembly and the Senate. The PPP, PML-N, and their minor party allies are close to a two-thirds majority in the assembly, but the Senate continues to be dominated by the president's political allies. Moreover, pending the restoration of the purged judges, it is the court staffed by Musharraf's judges that would rule on the legality of the national assembly resolution.

On Tuesday Musharraf announced that the new National Assembly would be convened for the first time next Monday, March 17. But the day before he had issued a warning to his political opponents, saying that his first priority as president is to uphold "political stability."

While many in Pakistan's elite—including a significant number of retired military officers—have urged Musharraf to resign, he is apparently calculating that he will be able to cling to power because of

continued support from the military and Washington and because of the longstanding bitter rivalry between the PML-N and PPP.

The media reported that Zardari and Sharif were both beaming at the press conference Sunday at which they announced their coalition deal. But it quickly emerged that the two parties continue to be divided over their attitude to Musharraf. While Sharif has long demanded Musharraf's resignation, the PPP has never categorically rejected working with the autocrat, even while publicly accusing elements around his regime of orchestrating Benazir Bhutto's assassination.

When journalists pointed out that although the PPP-PML-N accord pledges to restore the judges, it is silent on Musharraf's fate, Sharif said that his party considers the Musharraf presidency "unconstitutional and illegal." Then added: "We will not embarrass each other on any issue."

Zardari, for his part, once again refused to rule out cooperating with the president, regardless of the fact that his election was bogus and "secured" through the imposition of martial law. On the issue of Musharraf, Zardari said, "We don't believe in personal agenda...We are hoping that everybody will work together in harmony."

Similarly on the judges' issue, the PPP head claimed everyone would be "accommodated," without explaining how Musharraf could be reconciled to a judiciary that would likely rule his presidency illegal.

Historically, the PML-N has had much closer ties to Pakistan's military-intelligence establishment than the PPP. The scion of a family of industrialists, Sharif began his political career as a protégé of the US-backed dictator General Zia-ul Haq. During the 1990s, Sharif and his PML-N repeatedly worked with the military and government bureaucracy to unseat PPP governments.

But the PML-N has won political traction by casting itself as the anti-Musharraf party. Sharif did not choose this role, but had it thrust upon him first by the 1999 coup, and then by the fact that he was left out of the Bush administration's attempts to shore up the Musharraf regime by brokering a power-sharing deal with the PPP.

That said, it is generally recognized that the PML-N's surprisingly strong showing in the elections was because of its strident opposition to Musharraf, and because Sharif was more critical than the PPP of Washington's role in sustaining the dictator.

For several weeks the PML-N balked at joining a PPP-led national coalition government, saying it would support a PPP-led coalition from "the outside". Publicly it justified this on the grounds that it was not prepared to take the ministerial oath swearing allegiance to the president. The real reason was that it was positioning itself for a struggle with the PPP for popular support in anticipation of a second election.

Zardari and the PPP leadership, meanwhile, have come under strong public pressure to act against Musharraf, with lawyers continuing to mount protests demanding the restoration of the purged judges.

Ultimately, the PML-N agreed to join the PPP-led coalition in exchange for a commitment to pass a national assembly resolution restoring the judges.

Neither of the two parties has said much of substance about the country's deepening economic crisis. While Musharraf has boasted that he has presided over a period of unprecedented growth, the Pakistani economy and population have been battered in recent months by food and energy price hikes, power-cuts, and flour shortages.

In elite circles it is more or less universally accepted that the incoming government will have to take drastic action, including

cutting government spending. On February 29, the interim government raised power rates by 9 percent, gasoline by 5 rupees per litre and kerosene oil by 3.5 rupees per litre.

The PPP postures as a "pro-poor" party, but it is committed no less than the PML-N and the outgoing pro-Musharraf government to pro-investor policies of privatization, deregulation, and marketization.

By securing the PML-N's participation in the government, the PPP ensures that it will share in the public anger over the coming economic austerity measures.

The PPP and PML-N in no way represent the democratic aspirations of the Pakistani people. They speak for sections of the landlord-capitalist elite who resent the extent to which the military, with Washington's complicity, has monopolized political power and capitalist profits through a burgeoning network of military-controlled companies.

There are also elements, particularly in the PML-N camp, who believe that Musharraf could have better exploited the US's logistical dependence on Pakistan for its occupation of Afghanistan. These elements note with anger and apprehension that the US has been forging a strategic "global partnership" with India, including assisting India in obtaining a unique status within the world nuclear regulatory regime.

While the purging of the judges was a dictatorial action meant to perpetuate military rule, the purged judges are themselves longtime hand-raisers for Musharraf and defenders of the property relations that underpin Pakistan's grossly unequal socio-economic order.

Neither the PPP nor the PML-N is opposed to the decades-long alliance between Pakistan and US imperialism. Both have sought to thwart any mass challenge to the Musharraf regime and the military-dominated government for fear that it could split the military and give rise to socio-economic demands that challenge the privileges of the elite circles for which they speak.

In principle nothing precludes Washington working with either the PPP or PML-N. But under Musharraf, the Bush administration has been able to use Pakistan as a major base of US operations in Central Asia and the Middle East, including in its war preparations against Iran and as a site of offshore, CIA torture chambers. Moreover, the US is aware that behind Musharraf, at least up until now, stands the Pakistani military, which for decades has been a linchpin in the US's world geo-political and military strategy.

Washington fears that a confrontation between Pakistan's elected government and President Musharraf could spin out of control, further destabilizing the Pakistani state and providing a possible entry point for the masses into independent political struggle.

In an article Monday, Henry Kissinger the *eminence grise* of US imperialist strategy cautioned against a withdrawal of US support for Musharraf: "Conspicuous American disassociation would only compound our risks in Pakistan—not to mention the message it would send to other leaders in the region allied to America."



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