

Pakistani government moves to impeach President Musharraf

Vilani Peiris

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Amid an ongoing political crisis, Pakistan's ruling coalition this week initiated a formal impeachment process against President Pervez Musharraf, the country's former military strongman.

Musharraf is deeply detested by broad layers of the population for his nine years of dictatorial rule and support for the bogus US "war on terror". He seized power in a military coup in 1999, ousting Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif who was tried and convicted of trumped-up charges, then sent into exile. Under intense pressure from Washington, Musharraf withdrew Pakistan's backing for the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001 and supported the US-led occupation of that country.

Following a sham election that gave him a second term as president, Musharraf imposed draconian emergency rule last November and removed senior judges who threatened to declare his actions unconstitutional. He failed to suppress opposition, however, and was finally forced to hold national elections in February in which his Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PMLQ) suffered a humiliating defeat. A coalition led by the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and including Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML) took office.

The government is seeking to present Musharraf's impeachment as another step in the "transition to democracy". However, the move is a desperate attempt to shore up divisions within the fragile ruling coalition as well as stem growing anti-government sentiment over deteriorating living standards, economic turmoil and the government's continuing support for the US occupation of Afghanistan.

PPP leader Asif Ali Zardari announced on August 7 the intended impeachment of Musharraf, telling a press conference that it was "good news for democracy" in Pakistan. He blamed Musharraf's rule for the country's "critical economic impasse" and for "weakening the federation". Large sections of the tribal areas near the

border with Afghanistan are under the sway of armed militias that support or are directly involved in the anti-US insurgency in Afghanistan.

Sitting with Zardari, PML leader Sharif declared that the "coalition leadership will present a charge sheet against General Musharraf". The government has indicated that the charges against Musharraf would include violation of the constitution, economic mismanagement, corruption and murder. Information Minister Sherry Rehman declared last Sunday that the charge sheet would be "voluminous".

The move against Musharraf emerged only after months of friction between the two main coalition parties. The PPP had initially agreed to impeach Musharraf and reinstate the judges sacked by Musharraf when the coalition government was formed. But under pressure from Washington to collaborate with Musharraf, Zardari took no steps to implement these promises. As part of a US-brokered deal with the late PPP head Benazir Bhutto, Musharraf overturned Zardari's corruption convictions.

In May, Sharif pulled PML members out of the cabinet in protest against Zardari's backtracking and hinted that he would end the alliance altogether. Sharif, whose political mentor was former military dictator Zia ul Haq and who did not hesitate to use autocratic methods in office, is no democrat. He has pressed for Musharraf's impeachment and the reinstatement of the sacked judges as a means of exploiting growing discontent not only with the president but the PPP.

The PPP-led government is facing a myriad of problems and its attempts to reach an accommodation with Musharraf threatened to unleash a backlash. A recent opinion poll carried out by the International Republican Institute found that an unprecedented 85 percent of those polled wanted Musharraf to resign. Support for the PPP, which emerged as the largest party in the February poll, is also slipping.

The National Assembly convened on Monday to initiate the impeachment process but has yet to be presented with a charge sheet. Three of the country's four provinces—Punjab, North West Frontier Province and Sindh—voted overwhelmingly this week for non-binding motions calling for Musharraf to resign. Balochistan, the final province, is expected to quickly follow suit. Zardari claims that the government has 350 votes out of the 442 members of the combined National Assembly and Senate needed to provide the two-thirds majority for the impeachment motion.

However, by delaying the formal charges, the government appears to be trying to find a formula for Musharraf to resign without impeachment. Such a manoeuvre is aimed at avoiding a confrontation with the military and the US. Former Pakistani General Talat Masood told the *Independent* on Monday: "Negotiations are going on for a safe exit to be given to him [Musharraf]... I think the Americans and the army are demanding he be given [safe passage]. Impeachment would mean a huge distraction from the war on terror."

Under pressure from the US, the Pakistani army is currently engaged in a military crackdown on Islamic militants in the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) along the Pakistan-Afghan border. Washington has made veiled threats of launching unilateral operations inside Pakistani territory if the army does not prevent guerrillas from infiltrating into Afghanistan.

At this stage, Musharraf has insisted that he will not step down. He has the power under the undemocratic constitution drawn up during his rule to simply dissolve parliament. His position, however, is becoming increasingly untenable, as key allies appear to be deserting him. On Monday about 30 MPs of the PMLQ voted in the Punjab assembly for the resolution against Musharraf. On Tuesday, the leader of a PPP breakaway group and former close Musharraf ally, Aftab Sherpao, supported the motion against the president.

US state department spokesman Gonzalo Gallegos declared last week: "We have consistently said the internal politics of Pakistan are an issue for the Pakistani people to decide". But clearly there are concerns in Washington about the removal of a close US ally. The *Dawn* commented on Monday that Americans fear a "power struggle between pro-and anti-Musharraf forces could push nuclear-armed Pakistan into a protracted turmoil; prevent its shaky civilian government from moving against militants hiding in FATA; and even jeopardise vital US supply lines through Pakistan to

Afghanistan".

Behind the scenes, US officials are intimately involved in Pakistan's internal political affairs. On Monday evening, the US Ambassador to Islamabad, Ann W. Patterson met with Musharraf. The *Nation* reported that the former British High commissioner and current UK Foreign Office high official, Mark Grant, was meeting with PPP and PMLN leaders, while a Saudi Arabian delegation was on its way to Islamabad for talks. The *Nation* claimed that the British envoy was seeking to persuade Musharraf to resign as part of a deal to defuse the political crisis.

The Pakistani economy is in shambles and social unrest is mounting. The country's trade deficit grew by 52.9 percent in the year to June to reach \$US18 billion, compared to \$11 billion in the previous year. High world oil prices were the major factor. The annualised inflation rate jumped to an all-time high of 32.2 percent in the week ending July 25. The value of Pakistani currency has declined to just 72 rupees to the US dollar. The stock market in Karachi has lost 35 percent of its value since April, provoking angry street protests. Pakistan's total foreign debt and liabilities have risen to more than \$46 billion.

For ordinary working people, life is becoming increasingly difficult. Fuel, transport and food prices have risen sharply. Power blackouts are common. Unemployment is rising. While impeaching Musharraf may provide a temporary distraction, neither the PPP nor the PML has any solutions to the country's intractable economic and social problems. At the same time, the government faces widespread opposition to its support for the US occupation of Afghanistan and Pakistani military operations in the FATA. All of this is preparing the ground for a new political eruption.



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