

Pakistan rocked by protests after opposition leaders stripped of political rights

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There have been demonstrations in cities across Pakistan, and especially the Punjab, for the past three days, protesting against Wednesday's Supreme Court ruling that former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his brother, Shahbaz Sharif, are ineligible to stand for election or hold any public office. The Sharifs are the principal leaders of the country's main opposition party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) or PML (N).

According to media reports there have been many violent encounters between PML (N) activists, who are overwhelmingly drawn from the families of traders and professionals, and the police. In the Punjab, home to some 60 percent of Pakistan's population, paramilitary troops have been placed on high alert.

The court based its ruling on the trumped-up criminal convictions that the now defrocked military dictator General Pervez Musharraf secured against the Sharifs after deposing Nawaz Sharif as prime minister in an October 1999 military coup.

The court's composition is itself a matter of much controversy, since the current chief justice and many of his fellow Supreme and High Court judges were installed by Musharraf in a further flagrant violation of the country's constitution. In November 2007, in what ultimately proved to be a failed attempt to prevent his regime from unraveling, Musharraf declared a state of emergency and purged the top levels of the judiciary of all those who would not sign an oath of loyalty to him.

The Pakistan People's Party (PPP)-led coalition government, which one year ago this month came to power on a wave of popular opposition to Musharraf and his sponsors in the Bush administration, has reneged on a pledge to restore the purged judges; just as it has failed to fulfill its promise to amend the constitution to strip the presidency of the vast powers given it under Musharraf and a previous military dictator, Zia-ul-Haq.

Pakistan's current president, Asif Ali Zardari, the chairperson of the PPP and widower of Benazir Bhutto, has claimed that the court decision excluding the Sharifs from public life was taken in good faith by an autonomous judiciary.

This is a transparent lie. The attack on the Sharifs is an anti-democratic powerplay aimed at strengthening the government's hand as it pursues manifestly unpopular policies. These include imposing an International Monetary Fund restructuring program which involves massive cuts to development expenditure and the elimination of all subsidies on energy products, and providing full support for the expansion of the US war in Afghanistan.

Zardari's claims are belied by the way his regime has attempted to use the court judgment as a bludgeon against the PML (N). Within hours of the Supreme Court judgment the Punjab Governor, a notorious PPP partisan, temporarily seized constitutional authority over the provincial government on the grounds that the court's disqualification of Shahbaz, who was the Punjab chief minister, had left a political vacuum. When the national government learned that the PML (N) was going to call the provincial assembly into session, President Zardari used his emergency powers to suspend the assembly and place Pakistan's most populous province under "president's rule," i.e. central government control, for the next two months.

The PML (N), which holds close to half of the seats in the Punjab assembly, was thus arbitrarily prevented from naming and seeking the assembly's approval for an alternate chief minister to Shahbaz Sharif, and its government, which had repeatedly shown it had the "confidence" of the assembly, was ousted by presidential fiat.

The following day, the PPP leadership announced that it aims to supplant the PML (N), as the Punjab's government when president's rule is withdrawn. Toward this end it is now courting legislative assembly members from the PML (Q), the party created by Musharraf and the army to provide a parliamentary fig leaf for military rule.

Nawaz Sharif has claimed that Zardari offered to make the court case against him and his brother go away if they agreed to Chief Justice Abdul Hameed Dogar, who was elevated to the position by Musharraf during his November 2007 purge, retaining his post.

Speaking to reporters Wednesday, Nawaz Sharif said the ruling against him and his brother was "not a judicial decision, but an edict,"—in other words it was ordered by Zardari. Continued Sharif, "It amounts to stabbing me in the back."

Addressing a large public rally in Sheikupura Thursday, Sharif said Zardari "has deceived the nation" and failed to "honour his commitments."

At a subsequent rally he is reported to have urged police not to obey the current Punjab government and he has pledged that his party will mobilize in support of the protests lawyers are to mount at the beginning of next month demanding the reinstatement of all the purged judges.

The *Dawn*, Pakistan's largest English language daily, has decried the court's decision. It declared the ruling "another dubious

judgment ... in Pakistan's grim judicial history," a reference to the numerous occasions the judiciary has sanctioned egregious violations of the country's constitution and basic democratic rights by the executive and the military. "The grounds for the Sharifs' disqualification," said the *Dawn*, "were laid by a dictator and no one with an iota of common sense could accept that Pervez Musharraf was trying to uphold the rule of law or some elevated principle of justice by shutting the Sharif brothers out of electoral politics."

The PPP, whose leadership hails from the Sindh, and the PML (N), which is based in the Punjab, are longstanding bitter rivals. During the late 1980s and 1990s, the Sharifs repeatedly collaborated with the military and bureaucracy against the PPP, which was mistrusted by the Pakistani establishment because of its populist demagoguery and association with the popular upsurge against military rule in the late 1960s.

Benazir Bhutto initially welcomed Musharraf's 1999 coup.

In 2006 the two parties formed a shaky "anti-Musharraf" alliance. What united them, apart from their anger at being squeezed out of the lucrative patronage networks that are the prerogative of those who wield political power in Pakistan, was their common opposition to any genuine popular movement against the dictatorship. A popular movement, they feared, would spin out of their control and begin to raise the socio-economic grievances of Pakistan's toilers.

In 2007, the Bush administration, recognizing that the Musharraf regime was increasingly socially isolated due to mounting economic problems, its shameless pursuit of crony capitalism, political repression, and subservience to Washington and its predatory wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, sought to shore it up by brokering a rapprochement with the PPP.

In Bhutto the Bush administration found a willing accomplice. Sharif, a rightwing industrialist, with close ties to the Saudi government, to his dismay found himself the odd man out. He was viewed warily by Washington because of his intense personal hostility to Musharraf—who, it needs be remembered, had originally wanted to execute him—and because of his connections to the Islamic fundamentalist right (sections of which are sympathetic to the Taliban.)

Ultimately, the PPP, under the tutelage of the Bush administration, struck a sordid deal with the dictator Musharraf, under which they facilitated his "re-election" as president in a sham vote, in return for the passing of a presidential order that absolved Bhutto and other top PPP leaders of any misdeeds they may have committed when they held office. This paved the way for Bhutto to return to Pakistan to contest the coming parliamentary elections.

The National Reconciliation Ordinance, however, was not extended to the Sharifs.

Here is not the place to recapitulate all the vicissitudes of the Musharraf-PPP deal, a deal that was bitterly resented by the general and which elements in and around the regime sought to literally blow up, by assassinating Bhutto.

Not wanting to anger Washington, Zardari avoided any direct challenge to Musharraf long after parties opposed to his rule had swept the February 2008 elections. The General, who in December

2007 gave up his post as head of Pakistan's armed forces, was only squeezed from the presidency last August, when Zardari felt the need to do something to restore the PPP's rapidly diminishing popular credibility and because the PPP supremo now felt himself strong enough to supplant the general in Washington's eyes as Pakistan's new "strongman."

Musharraf, however, remains at complete liberty. Neither he nor anyone else has been called to account for the crimes of eight years of military rule. Even more importantly, the PPP-led government has done nothing to break the military's stranglehold over Pakistan's political and economic life or to repudiate Pakistan's decades-long subservient relationship to Washington—a relationship that finds its consummate expression in the Pentagon-Pakistani military nexus.

Sharif and his PML (N), meanwhile, have sought to capitalize on the rapid fall in popular support for Zardari and the PPP, trying to recast Pakistan's traditional rightwing, pro-military party as the champion of democracy.

Sharif has made the restoration of the purged judges his *cause célèbre*, claiming that the purged judges stood up to the dictator Musharraf. The reality is that all the judges served the Musharraf dictatorship for many a year and upheld the grossly unequal social order that has condemned the vast majority of Pakistanis to poverty and hardship.

If Zardari has resisted restoring the judges it is for tactical reasons. He doesn't want the judges, and in particular the sacked Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry causing problems with the military by subjecting to judicial scrutiny actions taken by Musharraf, especially in the final years of his rule, including the legality of the National Reconciliation Ordinance.

The Obama administration has said nothing publicly about the eruption of political crisis in Pakistan. The US elite has time and again shown callous indifference to the democratic rights of the Pakistani people. It usually only expresses concern if it fears the government and/or military have overplayed their hand stoking popular opposition to the point where it could damage US interests, or if it feels Islamabad isn't being sufficiently pliant.

The *New York Times*, for example, only "discovered" that the US was backing a brutal military dictatorship in Pakistan when it began to question whether Washington was getting its money's worth from the Musharraf regime; that is whether Islamabad was doing enough to support the US occupation of Afghanistan in exchange for the \$10 billion in aid and payments it had received from the Bush administration.

Pakistan remains pivotal to the plans of US imperialism. This week top Pakistan and Afghan officials visited Washington to discuss the Pentagon's plans to expand the war in Afghanistan and into Pakistan's border regions.



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