

Pakistan's government suppresses opposition protests

Keith Jones
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Pakistan's government is using antidemocratic measures akin to those employed by the former US-backed dictator General Pervez Musharraf to suppress an agitation mounted by the principal opposition party and lawyer groups.

The Pakistan People's Party-led coalition government has invoked a draconian section of the criminal code that dates back to the British colonial regime to impose a nationwide ban on demonstrations, processions, and political meetings.

On Wednesday police took into preventive custody hundreds of cadres of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), as well as lawyers active in the campaign to restore to the judicial bench the high and supreme court judges that Musharraf purged in November 2007. The government's aim was to stifle the "Long March"—a nationwide campaign of rallies and demonstrations that was slated to begin Thursday and is to culminate Monday, March 16 in an indefinite sit-in outside Pakistan's parliament.

Yesterday, baton-wielding police attacked Long March demonstrators in Karachi and arrested scores more people. Military forces have been placed on alert in case the protests escalate.

The Long March's principal demand is for the restoration of the judges. But with the political struggle between the Muslim League (Nawaz) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) intensifying, it has become a platform for former prime minister Nawaz Sharif to mobilize opposition to a series of patently antidemocratic government maneuvers aimed at marginalizing him and his party.

First, Pakistani President and PPP chairperson Asif Ali Zardari prevailed on the Supreme Court to rule that Sharif and his brother, then the Punjab Chief Minister, are ineligible to hold public office based on the trumped-up criminal convictions that Musharraf had issued against them shortly after he deposed Nawaz Sharif as Pakistan's prime minister in 1999. Then Zardari used the Supreme Court judgment as a pretext to oust the PML (N) government in the Punjab and signaled that when "Governor's rule" is rescinded the PPP will stake claim to forming the government in the province that is home to 60 percent of Pakistan's 170 million people.

This week's crackdown has been in preparation for some time. Late last month, Zardari, in the name of administrative efficiency, issued a presidential decree establishing mobile courts, a measure last used by the British in 1919 when the Punjab was convulsed by mass anticolonial protests. Ultimately, the presidential decree had to be dropped when it was pointed out that the president is empowered to issue such decrees only when parliament is not in session.

At the beginning of this week, Rehman Malik, the Adviser to the Prime Minister on the Interior, suggested in a television interview that Sharif could be charged with sedition and said the leaders of the Long March would be held responsible if the march is associated with any violence. Malik cited several recent Sharif speeches to support his claim that the PML (N) chief is calling on people, including the police, to disobey the government. "Inciting people for disobedience is sedition," declared

Malik. "It could get life imprisonment."

In recent days Sharif has become fiercer in his denunciations of Zardari, accusing him of wanting to maintain Musharraf's "kangaroo courts" and of betraying his public pledges to both restore the purged judges and amend the constitution so as to eliminate the vast powers that Musharraf and the previous military dictator, Zia-ul-Haq, gave the president.

Sharif has publicly claimed that elements within the government are intent on assassinating him: "Threats to my life come from high-ranking government officials ... my sources say."

Speaking at a rally Monday, Sharif urged people to "rise and join the Long March to Islamabad to save Pakistan." "The emotion I am seeing here," added the PML (N) leader, "is a prelude to a revolution."

On Thursday Sharif appeared to reject any talks with the president until two conditions are met: the judges are restored to the bench and the February 25th Supreme Court judgment barring him and his brother, Shabbaz Sharif, from standing for election and holding office is set aside.

PML (N) leaders have claimed that several senior police officials have been dismissed for helping party supporters and leaders of the lawyer movement remain at liberty by warning them of their imminent arrest.

The role of the US

The power struggle between Pakistan's two principal political parties has provoked growing concern within the Pakistani elite and in western capitals about the stability of the country's key governmental institutions. US pressure for Islamabad to do more to support the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan, including regular US missile strikes inside Pakistan, has only deepened popular antipathy to Washington, which is rightly seen by ordinary Pakistanis as the bulwark of a succession of Pakistani military dictatorships. No less destabilizing is the impact of the world economic crisis. Recently Pakistan secured \$7.6 billion in loans from the International Monetary Fund, but in exchange for slashing development spending and energy subsidies and hiking interest rates sharply. So precarious is Pakistan's economic plight, the government is already working on a request for additional IMF support.

The *Dawn* reported Thursday that "US and British diplomats have been meeting all sides in recent days in an effort to avoid violence and chaos." Pakistani military leaders have reportedly also been active behind the scenes.

Later Thursday the US Ambassador to Pakistan, Anne Patterson, met with Sharif, his brother, Shabbaz, and a handful of other top PML (N) leaders at Sharif's residence and, a few hours later, the US's special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, had a three-way

telephone conversation with Patterson and Zardari. Unidentified sources told the *Dawn* that Holbrooke expressed concern about the arrest of opposition leaders and urged Zardari to show restraint.

The president is said to have blamed the crisis on PML (N) intransigence. In response to Holbrooke's concerns that the political turmoil could embolden anti-US insurgents in Pakistan's border region or impede the Pakistani military's efforts to suppress them, Zardari pledged that his government will press forward with the eradication of the Taliban-allied movement in Pakistan.

To date, no member of the Obama administration has made any public criticism, however muted, either of the Pakistan government's blanket ban on political protests or the transparent attempt to sideline the principal opposition party. The US has a notorious, decades-long record of complicity in Islamabad's systematic violation of Pakistani people's democratic rights.

At Wednesday's US State Department press briefing, department spokesman Robert Wood danced round a lengthy series of questions about developments in Pakistan. While he proclaimed the US's support for the principles of free speech and assembly, Wood pointedly refused to criticize the Pakistani government for running roughshod over them.

A multimillionaire industrialist, Sharif began his political career as a protégé of General Zia-ul-Haq and has close ties with the Saudi monarchy. Nonetheless, he has been viewed warily by Washington because of his friendly relations with the Islamic fundamentalist right. In 2007, when the Bush administration concluded that Musharraf's regime was unraveling, it sought to broker a deal between the general and the PPP's then life chairperson Benazir Bhutto—a deal from which Sharif, to his chagrin, was excluded.

He has since used this to considerable political effect, casting himself as the most intransigent opponent of Musharraf and making a calibrated appeal to popular anti-American sentiment. At the same time, Sharif has repeatedly expressed his readiness to work with the US.

The PPP and PML (N) have a long and bitter rivalry. During the 1990s Sharif repeatedly conspired with the military and bureaucracy to topple PPP governments. Benazir Bhutto initially welcomed Musharraf's 1999 coup against Sharif and in 2007 she was more than willing to strike, under US sponsorship, a power-sharing deal with the general that involved the promulgation of a presidential order indemnifying her and Zardari on all possible criminal charges relating to the actions of previous PPP governments, but that left Sharif a political *persona non grata*.

Zardari's power grab, his transparent attempt to use the courts and the powers of the presidency to cut down the PML (N), is thus a continuation of the two parties' longstanding struggle for office and the patronage prerogatives that go with it. But the rapidity with which Zardari is assuming the political posture of Musharraf is also a function of the unpopular policies he is compelled to pursue on behalf of the Pakistani bourgeoisie—support for the US occupation of Afghanistan and a socially incendiary IMF restructuring program.

According to opinion polls, little more than a year after the elections that led to the coming to power of the PPP-led government and just six months after Zardari succeeded Musharraf as president, his popularity ratings are roughly equal to those of the general in his last year in office.

Washington is especially concerned about the possible impact of a prolonged confrontation between Pakistan's two major parties on the military. Musharraf, who remains politically active in his retirement, has been seeking to rally the Pakistan Muslim League (Q), the party the military sponsored to provide a civilian fig-leaf for the dictatorship, behind the PPP.

Meanwhile, the Pakistan Ex-Servicemen's, an organization of retired officers, has long been playing an active role in the lawyers' campaign to restore Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry and the other purged judges to the bench. Talat Masood, a retired army general and prominent military-

security analyst with close connections to the Pentagon, told the *Washington Post* this week, "It's mind-boggling. Zardari seems to view the affairs of state as wheeling and dealing, rewarding cronies and punishing enemies. If he wants to be a dictator, he is sadly mistaken because the army is not going to be behind him. He is on a suicide mission."

A clash between the PPP and PML (N) also runs the risk of exacerbating regional cleavages within the Pakistani elite. The PML (N) is principally a Punjabi party. While the PPP has traditionally had a broader geographic base of support, it is very much identified with Sind, Pakistan's second largest province. (The Bhuttos—Zardari is the widower of Benazir Bhutto—are one of Sind's great landowning families.)

Pakistan's toilers must oppose the PPP's power grab and suspension of basic democratic rights. The antidemocratic measures being deployed today against the small traders, professionals, and middle-class students supporting the PML (N)-lawyer agitation will be imposed more systematically and ruthlessly against any movement of the working class.

At the same time, no political support should be given to the big business PML (N). All manner of right-wing forces including the Ex-Servicemen's Association and the Jamaat-e-Islami, the country's largest Islamic fundamentalist party, have fallen in behind the campaign to restore the defrocked judges.

Sharif's claim that the key to establishing democracy in Pakistan is to win the judges' reinstatement is preposterous. All loyally served the Musharraf dictatorship for years; all have enforced the laws that sanction and enforce Pakistan's grossly unequal social order.

And while Sharif may want to settle some personal scores with Musharraf—who, it should be remembered, initially sought his execution—he, like Zardari and the PPP leadership, upholds the Pentagon-Pakistani military nexus and the privileged and preponderant political role of the officer caste.

Similarly Sharif, whose own governments enforced IMF austerity in the 1990s, has no substantive disagreement with the right-wing socioeconomic policies of the current PPP regime.

The past year of reputed democratic civilian rule in Pakistan has only served to underscore that the struggle for democracy will be carried out not in alliance with the parties of the venal Pakistani bourgeoisie, but rather by mobilizing the working class at the head of the toiling masses in ruthless political struggle against them.

The struggle for basic civil liberties, the separation of church from state, the severing of the Pakistani-US strategic alliance, and the dismantling of the vast Pakistani military apparatus must be tied to the struggle against Pakistan's dependent capitalist social order, for a workers and peasants government that can provide jobs, land and basic public services to all.



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