

# Pakistan: Popular discontent, military intrigue rise after August floods

**Our correspondent**  
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The August 2010 floods in war-torn Pakistan have not only displaced 21 million people but also created a severe food shortage, which is expected to worsen in the coming days.

The floods have caused unprecedented damage. Apart from immediate losses of lives and property, the overall impact of the catastrophe may be far more enormous and far-reaching than can be currently estimated. Experts now evaluate the damage caused by the floods at \$43 billion. The disaster has resulted in losses of thousands of human lives and massive damage to livestock, agriculture and dairy sectors. Highways, railways, and the power grid have been disrupted, and 1.2 million homes have been destroyed.

The millions of displaced face shortages of food and water, and diseases are rapidly spreading. The UN Children's Fund estimated that 105,000 children were at risk of dying from malnutrition over the next six months. According to a World Health Organization estimate, 30 to 35 percent of children in Pakistan were already malnourished prior to the floods.

The floods also deepen the acute political crisis in Pakistan. They are deepening the divisions inside the ruling elite and raising the prospect of a possible return to military dictatorship, in the face of rising popular anger over the handling of the floods.

Though the flood itself was a natural disaster, its destructive impact stems largely from policies pursued by the ruling classes and the imperialist powers, who have ruthlessly exploited the region for centuries. Consigned to exploitation as a cheap-labor economy by global capital, Pakistan has a ragged infrastructure, and its people suffer from mass poverty.

Due to the state's complete failure to cope with the disaster and deliver the necessary relief to victims, most of the affected families have had to survive on their own. The ruling classes, the state, and the army have broken dams and floodgates to inundate villages and schools of poorer voters, while saving their own prime properties, crops, and US military bases.

The hypocrisy of the imperialist powers and their financial institutions—the IMF, World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank—has been powerfully exposed. So far, the US government has pledged a mere \$345 million for relief efforts in Pakistan, while spending tens of billions each year on the neo-colonial occupation of neighboring Afghanistan.

While offering limited humanitarian aid to flood victims, the financial institutions have imposed strict conditions on further borrowing, while demanding that the Pakistani government carry out sweeping austerity measures and other social attacks on working people. The tragedy of the floods has become transformed into an opportunity for big businesses, contractors, and financial capital to extract more profits from the masses.

The floods have been seized upon not only by the financial oligarchy, but by the Pakistani military—which was discredited by the nine-year, US-backed dictatorship of General Pervez Musharraf. Corporate media have highlighted the corruption of the civilian government and underlined the role of the military in relief efforts. With this, the military is tightening its grip over the government even though the country's present acute political crisis is the direct outcome of the army's collaboration with the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan.

The flood has not only washed away the credibility of the bourgeois democracy—which cuts deals with the military and assists the US war in Afghanistan—but has shaken the whole fabric of society.

The political crisis is sharply heading towards another possible military intervention. Pakistan's bourgeois parties directly and indirectly compromise with the military, betraying the masses time and again, and paving the way for re-imposition of military rule. The working class cannot defend its democratic rights through bourgeois parties like the PPP, nor by the judiciary, which are the instruments of the capitalist state collaborating with the imperialist war.

The issue of the NRO (National Reconciliation Ordinance) in particular hangs over the government like the sword of

Damocles. Pakistan's Supreme Court in its verdict of 16 December, 2009 declared the NRO is invalid.

The NRO was promulgated by Musharraf in October 2007, when he was still president. It was the outcome of a deal he had struck with the late Benazir Bhutto, life chairperson of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), in a covert meeting in Abu Dhabi. The deal was brokered by the United States. The aim was to draw the PPP into a new political set-up to continue the imperialist war and further US interests in the region. The ordinance specified that all cases against politicians—including corruption, extortion, kidnappings, murder, and other crimes—would be withdrawn.

Some of NRO's major beneficiaries are now in power—including Benazir's widower Asif Ali Zardari, now the president of Pakistan, and some of his closest ministers and partners. The other main beneficiary is the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) whose leader, is residing in London for several years, and other top figures faced charges of murder and other crimes.

The high court asked the government last week to write a letter to the Swiss courts, to reopen a corruption case against President Asif Ali Zardari closed under the NRO. In the wake of the directives, the law ministry sent the summary to the prime minister. The conflict between judiciary and civilian government is escalating, as the government pleads that the president enjoys immunity from trial by any court, and that no letter could be dispatched to a Swiss court.

On September 27 President Asif Ali Zardari, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani and Chief of the Army Staff General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani met at the presidency in the afternoon and discussed the deadlock between the government and judiciary. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court accepted on Monday a government request to put off the hearing of a case relating to implementation of its judgment on the NRO. It fixed the government's review petition on the verdict for October 13.

The split within the PPP is steadily growing. Last week Naheed Khan and Senator Safdar Abbasi openly criticized the Core committee meeting of the PPP conveyed by Zardari.

The army is manipulating this conflict to further tighten its grip over the government. On October 2 Musharraf confessed to having made a "mistake" during a press conference in London, notably mentioning the NRO. He invited other opposition politicians to join his new party, the All-Pakistan Muslim League.

Meanwhile, opposition politician Nawaz Sharif said in an October 2 television interview that the government is gradually

running out of options. He maintained that President Zardari should apologize to Allah and the nation for his deeds.

Top state officials have felt obliged to deny rumors of planning for a coup. In a speech at a dinner in Washington, Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qurashi denied suggestions that the Pakistan armed forces were preparing to oust the democratically elected government in Islamabad. Zardari during his October 1 speech in Badin district, Sind province said that the government had the mandate of 170 million people and there were not "many brave hearts" who can remove it.

The Obama administration is carefully watching the situation now unfolding in Pakistan. The recent NATO incursion and Pakistan's stoppage of supply to NATO forces in Afghanistan have raised US tensions with Pakistan, with an ally critical to US war efforts in Afghanistan. Richard Holbrooke, President Barack Obama's special representative for Pakistan and Afghanistan, acknowledged that the US relationship with Pakistan was "more complicated than any strategic relationship I have been involved in".

The US has escalated drone aircraft missile strikes against Islamic militants in tribal areas along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, in North Waziristan—the stronghold of the Haqqani network. Pakistani officials reported that at least 21 US drone attacks killed around 120 people in September, the highest monthly death toll yet. A covert US drone war in Pakistan has killed around 1,140 innocent civilians in about 140 strikes since August 2008, including some Islamic militants. The attacks fuel anti-American sentiment that has drastically increased since the invasion of Afghanistan.

Daily US drone attacks and last week's 86-year sentence announced to Aafia Siddiqui in a "terror" frame-up by a US court have infuriated Pakistani public opinion (see: "US frame-up victim Aafia Siddiqui sentenced to 86 years"). In one day alone, 29 oil tankers and containers carrying fuel and other materials for NATO forces in Afghanistan were attacked and torched.



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