Pakistan's PPP-led government on brink of collapse

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The survival of the Pakistan Peoples' Party-led national coalition government is in jeopardy following Sunday's announcement by the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) that its 25 National Assembly members will henceforth sit on the opposition benches.

The defection of the MQM, which comes on the heels of last month's withdrawal of support by the Muslim fundamentalist Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-F (JUI-F), leaves the Pakistan Peoples' Party or PPP with only the support of the Pashtun-based Awami National Party. Together the two parties hold just 158 of the 342 National Assembly seats, meaning that the government is in danger of being felled by a non-confidence vote in the coming days.

On Monday and Tuesday, Asif Ali Zardari, Pakistan's President and the PPP's co-chairman, and Yousuf Raza Gilani, his prime minister, were scrambling to shore up support for the government. This included making overtures to the MQM and the PML (Q)—the party the US-backed dictator General Musharraf created in 2002 to provide his military regime with a civilian-parliamentary façade. The PPP also appealed to its arch-rival, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), which is led by businessman, former prime minister and onetime political protégé of the military Nawaz Sharif.

A US State Department spokesman sought Monday to downplay the political crisis in Islamabad, which has provided pivotal logistical and military support to the US occupation of Afghanistan for the past nine years. There is every indication, however, that Washington is actively intervening behind the scenes to press the opposition parties not to act precipitously. The Obama administration fears that the unraveling of the PPP-led government would cut across two key reactionary objectives: prevailing on Islamabad to intensify the counter-insurgency war against Taliban-aligned groups in the country's Pashtun Afghan-borderlands and implementing a brutal, US-supported International Monetary Fund restructuring program.

The political maneuvering in Islamabad was disrupted by the assassination late Tuesday afternoon of Salman Taseer, the governor of the Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province. Taseer was a close confidant of President Zardari and bitter enemy of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz).

He was shot by a member of his Elite Force police security detail while leaving a market in an affluent Islamabad neighbourhood. The assassin reportedly said that he had murdered Taseer because of the governor's recent denunciations of the country's blasphemy laws, including the threatened execution of an impoverished Christian woman, Asia Bibi.

Pakistan's Islamic fundamentalist right has responded to widespread criticism of the persecution of Bibi by mounting an agitation in support of the blasphemy laws. These reactionary laws were drafted in the 1980s as part of the Islamization campaign led by the notorious US-backed dictatorship of Zia-ul Haq. Bowing to this agitation, the crisis-ridden PPP government recently announced it has no intention of amending, let alone repealing the blasphemy laws.

Pakistan's Interior Minister Rehman Malik has promised that a thorough investigation will be mounted to determine if Taseer's killer acted alone.

Pakistan has a long and murky history of political assassinations, arising from the chronic crisis of the Pakistani bourgeois state and the sordid struggles for power between the various factions of the country's ethnically-divided political elite and the bloated military-security apparatus upon which the entire Pakistani ruling class depends to uphold its property and privileges, maintain the country's territorial integrity, and gain international leverage by serving as the Pentagon's satraps or mercenaries.

Almost exactly three years ago, Zardari's wife and the PPP's "life chairperson," Benazir Bhutto, was assassinated. She had returned to Pakistan as part of a deal, brokered by the US administration of George W. Bush, under which she agreed to partner with the dictator Musharraf. But sections of the military-political establishment resisted this arrangement.

The Musharraf regime immediately blamed Benazir Bhutto's assassination on an Islamacist militia leader, but a United Nations investigation recently rejected this explanation, indicating that the assassination was carried out from within the Pakistani establishment.

Bhutto's assassination precipitated a national wave of rioting that underlined the isolation of the military government and the depth of popular anger over deteriorating economic conditions, the military's political and economic power, and Islamabad's role in the Afghan war. The PPP won a plurality in the February 2008 elections, with the PML (N)—whose leader Sharif, portrayed himself as Musharraf's first victim, since the general had come to power by ousting him as prime minister—finishing a strong second.

Less than three years later, the PPP and especially Zardari face massive popular resentment and opposition. The Pakistani economy has been rocked by the world economic crisis. Rapid food and energy price increases are pushing large sections of the population deeper into poverty. Chronic electrical power cuts are not only disrupting daily life, they have become an increasing drag on industrial production. And five months after the Indus flood waters subsided, millions are still without shelter and otherwise in need of emergency assistance.

And under the PPP-led government Islamabad has intensified its support for the US war in Afghanistan. Repeatedly the Pakistani military has carried out massive counterinsurgency operations in the country's northwest, using strafe-bombing, summary executions,

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disappearances and colonial-style collective punishment. As a result, several millions have been forced to flee their homes and villages, many never to return.

The current governmental crisis comes within the context of a long and fractious debate over the implementation of the latest IMF-dictated austerity measures. As a condition for its granting Pakistan the last two tranches of an $11.3 billion loan, the IMF is demanding that Islamabad: eliminate all energy price subsidies; slash social and developmental spending yet again to reduce the deficit to GNP ratio to 4.7 percent; impose a temporary 10 percent flood tax on those with annual incomes of 300,000 Rupees (US$3,500) or more; and replace an existing sales tax with a 15 percent Reformed General Sales Tax (RGST) that will raise more revenue because it will be applied to pharmaceuticals, fertilizers, agricultural equipment, some food items, and other essentials that have till now been tax-exempt.

All sections of Pakistan's political elite, from the PPP and PML (N) through the MQM, have previously implemented IMF austerity programs and favour privatization and other regressive "market" reforms. Similarly, all support the US occupation of Afghanistan, including, as further demonstrated by recent secret US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks, predator drone strikes in Pakistan.

But they are aware and fearful of the growing popular anger against the government. Recent months have witnessed new flights of demagogy from prominent politicians—including repeated invocations of the need for a "revolution" in Pakistan—and bitter political in-fighting, much of it directed at exploiting and whipping up national-ethnic and communal tensions.

Last September, under conditions where the floods had provided a stark demonstration of the utter failure of the Pakistani bourgeois state to build vital infrastructure and provide basic relief, Pakistan National Assembly, meeting in special session, unanimously adopted resolutions pledging to uphold democracy, institute "radical land reform," abolish "feudalism," and stamp out corruption.

These resolutions were, needless to say, not worth the paper they were printed on. Those who voted for them have connived with one military dictator after another and are themselves great landowners or their urban-based lawyers and business partners. But the fact that Pakistan's politicians feel the need for such gestures exemplifies the country's acute social and political crisis.

The MQM, a right-wing Karachi-based ethnic party that supported the dictator Musharraf, justified its withdrawal from the ruling coalition by saying that it could not support the government's decision to raise the prices of petroleum products by 9 percent on January 1.

Previously, the MQM had opposed the RGST and argued instead for a tax on agricultural incomes. In opposing the RGST, both the MQM and the PML (N) have given voice to the fears of sections of business that the new tax will prove an added expense and further dampen economic activity.

But while the MQM has withdrawn from the government and is threatening to pull out of its coalition with the PPP in administering the province of Sind, it has indicated that it will not move a motion of non-confidence in the government, nor vote for one.

The PML (N) has also taken an ambivalent stand on the government crisis. On Tuesday afternoon Sharif said he was giving the government a 72-hour ultimatum. Flanked by top party leaders he said that if the government wanted to extricate itself from the current crisis it would have to agree to an interim "people's" agenda, including withdrawal of the recent petroleum hikes, reduction in gas and electricity load-shedding, measures to control energy and other price increases, and a massive 30 percent cut in government expenditure.

Sharif said that if the government fails to agree to this agenda, he will "invite the opposition parties to materialize it." But later PML (N) officials indicated that Sharif was not prepared to precipitate the government's defeat, only that it might force the PPP out of the PML (N)-led coalition that governs the Punjab. PML (N) Chairman Raja Zafarul Haq told Reuters a non-confidence vote at this time would "damage the whole country."

Undoubtedly a key factor in the opposition's reluctance to press home its advantage, defeat the government and force new elections is US pressure not to plunge Pakistan deeper into political crisis.

But the PML (N) and the other opposition parties are also fearful of seizing the reins of power at this point because they don't want to take the responsibility for imposing the IMF austerity program, or similar "home-grown" measures, aimed at placing the burden of Pakistan's fiscal and economic crisis on the backs of the country's workers and toilers.

As the *New York Times* noted, "At a time when the economy is teetering, public discontent is growing over inflation and worsening, and the United States is seeking to expand cooperation in the war against terrorism [i.e., the Afghan war], no political party seems too eager" to form an alternate government.

As for the Pakistani military, it appears, for the present, to deem the current political arrangement acceptable, although its traditional enmity for the PPP—an enmity born of the latter's association decades ago with the popular opposition to military rule and posturing as an Islamic socialist party—no doubt remains.

After all, Pakistan's military, thanks to Washington's steadfast support of it as the bulwark of the US-Pakistan relationship and the PPP-led government's weakness and complicity, has been able to accrue ever greater power.

The difference between military and civilian rule has proven largely to be one of optics, with the PPP-led government pursuing an agenda of war and market reforms akin to that of Musharraf. Not a single officer or government official has suffered any penalty, let alone criminal prosecution, for their role in sustaining the Musharraf dictatorship. And the US-Pakistan military axis continues to thwart the will of the Pakistani people.

The democratic and social aspirations of the Pakistan people will only be realized through a working class-led socialist revolution directed against all factions of the Pakistani bourgeoisie and their allies and imperialist masters in Washington.

The authors also recommend:

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