

Pakistan: Military sponsored-PML (Q) joins PPP-led coalition government

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20 May 2011

The Pakistan Muslim League (Q)—the civilian face of the military regime that ruled Pakistan till 2008—has joined the country’s deeply unpopular Pakistan People’s Party-led federal government.

The deal reached between the longtime bitter rivals earlier this month may allow the government, which is beset by multiple crises, to stagger on for the remaining two years of its five-year mandate. But for the leadership of the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), the purpose of the deal is much more immediate. The PPP needs the PML (Q)’s support to pass its coming budget, which is being drafted to win the approval of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

As a condition for providing Islamabad with the last \$4 billion of an \$11.3 billion loan, the IMF is demanding the government dramatically reduce the country’s annual budget deficit through a combination of spending cuts and tax rises and press forward with selling-off a raft of government-owned corporations.

While the PPP government has temporarily imposed some of the IMF’s demands through presidential decree, should it fail to secure a parliamentary majority for the budget, which will likely be tabled next month, it will be forced to resign. The PPP is desperate to avoid defeat in parliament because it fears a debacle at the polls.

In exchange for helping the PPP impose the IMF’s regressive diktats, the PML (Q) has been rewarded with seven federal ministries, including Privatization, Health, and Defence Production and Industries, and with six ministers of state. Initially the PPP had agreed that a PML (Q) leader would be named Deputy prime minister, but backed off when it was pointed out that there is no provision for such a post in Pakistan’s constitution.

Both parties have said they expect the alliance will endure and that they will likely contest the 2013 National Assembly elections jointly. But in reality the PPP-PML (Q) compact is highly unstable. Several second rank PML (Q) leaders are complaining that the PPP has foisted on them junior ministries or ones that will be stripped of much of their power when the sections of the 18th Constitutional Amendment that devolve power to the provinces come into force.

As part of its maneuvering with the PML (Q), the PPP has indicated that it would be amenable to the creation of a new province, Saraiki, out of the Punjab’s southern districts, where the PML (Q) is strongest. This concession underscores the dire political straits in which the PPP finds itself, since any reorganization of the internal borders of

Pakistan—a state that has been torn by national-ethnic cleavages since its birth in the 1947 communal Partition of the subcontinent—would risk opening a Pandora’s Box.

The PPP’s alliance with the military-sponsored PML (Q) is a further demonstration of its utter political putrefaction. The PPP, a party that one postured as “socialist” and which traditionally has appealed for support by pointing to the abuse and machinations it has suffered at the hands of the military-bureaucratic establishment, now courts the military’s political satraps in a desperate bid to cling to power. Top leaders of the PPP, it need be recalled, were not long ago publicly accusing several senior PML (Q) leaders of having been co-conspirators in the December 2007 assassination of PPP Chairperson-for-life Benazir Bhutto.

The PML (Q) was formed in 2002 at the instigation of the US-backed strongman General Pervez Musharraf so as to give his military dictatorship a civilian window dressing. Most of its leaders had previously been associated with the previous rightwing, Islamic fundamentalist dictator, General Zia-ul Haq and the party he spawned, the Pakistan Muslim League.

Following Musharraf’s staged 2002 parliamentary elections, PML (Q) leaders were allotted various ministries in Pakistan federal and provincial governments and for the next five years served as enforcers of Musharraf’s dictatorship and its two key policies—“free-market” restructuring and fulsome support for the US war in Afghanistan. Although the February 2008 National Assembly elections were far from free or fair, the PML (Q) suffered a debacle, winning just 49 National Assembly seats and being reduced to third-party status even in its principal base, the Punjab.

The PPP’s own attitude to the Musharraf dictatorship was highly ambiguous. It welcomed the 1999 coup by which Musharraf toppled its arch-rival Nawaz Sharif, the head of the Pakistan Muslim League and one-time protégé of General Zia. It moved into opposition when Musharraf made it clear that he was determined to exclude the PPP from any positions of power. But Benazir Bhutto opposed any mass movement against the dictatorship because she feared it would escape the control of the bourgeois political establishment. Instead, Bhutto courted George W. Bush and his administration, arguing that a “civilian,” i.e., PPP-led, government would be even more pliant to US wishes in the conduct of the Afghan War than Musharraf’s regime. In the fall of 2007, the Bush administration brokered a deal under which Bhutto was to shore up Musharraf’s increasingly shaky rule by

serving as his prime minister. But the bargain soon unraveled due to opposition from within the General's camp, especially from the PML (Q) leadership.

The increasingly desperate steps Musharraf and his allies took in the final months of 2007—including the declaration of a state of emergency and Bhutto's assassination—only served to incite popular opposition to the military government. Ultimately, the officer corps concluded its political and economic interests would be best served by easing Musharraf from power.

The PPP emerged victorious in the 2008 elections, capitalizing on the universal revulsion of the US-backed dictatorship and its political allies. However, the civilian government has only continued and deepened the policies of the Musharraf regime. The PPP-led government has escalated the counterinsurgency war in the Afghan border region, forcing hundreds of thousands to flee their homes and infuriating ordinary Pakistanis across the country, and has otherwise eagerly collaborated with Washington. There is at least one deadly US Predator drone missile attack nearly every week. Victims of these illegal attacks are routinely labeled "terrorists" by the media and government without any verification. When the CIA spy Raymond Davis gunned down two Pakistani youths in January, the PPP spared no effort in securing his release to placate Washington.

The PPP has also continued the pro-business reforms of the Musharraf regime, imposing draconian austerity measures under orders from the IMF. However in May 2010, after the PPP-led government failed to implement a Reformed General Sales Tax (RGST), the IMF suspended its loan disbursements.

The PPP's efforts to impose the RGST and other regressive measures have been complicated by the attempts of its political rivals to posture as opponents of the IMF's right-wing reforms. These include two parties that left the coalition government at the beginning of this year, the Karachi-based MQM, and the Islamic fundamentalist JUI-F.

After the PML (Q) negotiated its way into the PPP-led government, the MQM, based on the calculation that the government would be able to cling to office, opted to rejoin the coalition. But the PPP remains wary of the MQM, some of whose members in Karachi are engaged in a bloody turf war with PPP-backed groups in the city for control of drug and other rackets.

The PML (Q) was invited to join the government so as provide the PPP with the parliamentary votes needed to implement the IMF diktats, measures it knows will provoke anger and resistance from the working class. The IMF is demanding that Islamabad implement the RGST and eliminate all price subsidies on electricity, petroleum products, and natural gas under conditions where Pakistan's toilers have already seen their living standards deteriorate significantly due to rising food and oil prices. The PPP-led government has also been told to transform public sector corporations including Pakistan International Airlines and Pakistan Steel Mills into for-profit enterprises, a process that is guaranteed to include massive layoffs and pave the way for their privatization.

The PML (Q) is well aware of the role it is to play in imposing the

IMF's austerity measures on Pakistan's workers and toilers. Thus Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi, one of its leading members and a former Chief Minister of Punjab, said, "The PML-Q decided to join the government keeping in view the circumstances and realizing that the government needed political support in order to face the national challenges. Our party feels that political stability can bring about economic stability and ensure peace in the country."

The PPP's realignment with the PML (Q) is in keeping with its deference to the military, which despite the return to civilian rule continues to wield vast political power, including effective control of Pakistan's military, national security, and foreign policy. The PPP's initial attempts to limit the army's predominance were anemic and quickly abandoned. In 2008, President Asif Ali Zardari tried to bring the ISI, the military intelligence agency, under the control of the Interior Ministry, but he aborted the process at the first sign of opposition. Two years later, the army granted the ISI chief a second extension without bothering to consult the coalition government.

The May 2 US raid on Abbottabad and the assassination of Osama bin Laden have created a storm of controversy in the country. The Pakistani Army was not informed about the raid ahead of time, resulting in its humiliation and another outrageous violation of Pakistan's sovereignty. Under conditions where there are demands for an investigation into the military's failure to detect either the illegal US incursion or Bin Laden's presence in a military town not far from the national capital, the PPP has rushed to the defense of the officer corps. It has repeatedly declared its confidence in the military and its leadership and placed an army officer in charge of the investigation into the Abbottabad raid, while resisting opposition calls for an independent inquiry. In exchange, the government hopes to secure the army's support until the next parliamentary elections.

The alliance between the PPP and PML (Q) is a significant setback for Nawaz Sharif and his PML (Nawaz). The PML (N), which governs the Punjab, Pakistan's largest province, is seeking to regain the initiative by capitalizing on popular opposition to PPP's austerity measures and its association the US-led "war on terror." The PML (N) has come out against the RGST, and has instead called for taxes on agriculture and certain industries, and massive but unspecified budget cuts. The PML (N) has enjoyed close relations with the military since its birth and is fully committed to the decades long reactionary strategic partnership between Islamabad and Washington. But it is using the summary execution of Bin Laden as a weapon against the PPP by posturing as opponents of the US's machinations in Pakistan and its infringement of Pakistani sovereignty.



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