Pakistani elite plunged into crisis over reputed secret offer to US

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Amid heightened tensions between Washington and Islamabad, Pakistan's national coalition government has been shaken by allegations that its ambassador to the United States, Husain Haqqani, composed a memo last May pledging even more obsequious compliance with Washington's demands if the US helped dissuade Pakistan's military from mounting a coup.

Haqqani has vehemently denied having had anything to do with the memo, but the embattled Pakistan People's Party (PPP)-led government accepted his resignation late last month.

The existence of the confidential memo was first brought to light by a shadowy Pakistani-American businessman, Mansoor Ijaz. In October, the London-based *Financial Times* published an op-ed by Ijaz in which he claimed to have helped deliver the memo from Haqqani to Admiral Mike Mullen, then the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Written in the days immediately following the Washington's May 2 summary execution of Osama Bin Laden, the controversial memo warned that the Pakistani military was incensed by the illegal raid and could be on the verge of forcing the PPP-led civilian government from power. It urged Admiral Mullen to convey a strong message to Pakistan's chief of army staff, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, and the director-general of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Lt. Gen. Ahmad Shuja Pasha, to "end their brinkmanship aimed at bringing down the civilian apparatus."

The memo offers a six-point plan under which Pakistan would make a new strategic shift to accommodate US imperialist interests, including ceding the US the right to conduct military operations inside Pakistan. In exchange, the US would maintain pressure on the Pakistani military to prevent it from carrying out a coup against the weak and deeply unpopular civilian government.

The memo scandal has erupted just as relations between Washington and Islamabad have again descended into crisis. On November 26, NATO helicopters bombed two Pakistani military posts near Salaa on the Pakistan side of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. More than two dozen Pakistani soldiers were killed during the assault, sparking protests throughout the country. On Tuesday, General Martin Dempsey, Mullen's successor as the head of the US military, admitted that the US relationship with Pakistan is "the worst it's ever been," but refused to apologize for the assault. A day earlier, Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani warned that there would be "no more business as usual" with Washington.

While it is not entirely clear whether Haqqani authored the memo, or that he did so under orders from President Zardari, the former ambassador's forced resignation on November 22 suggests that the allegations against him have some basis in fact. On November 24, the government appointed former Information Minister Sherry Rahman to replace Haqqani as the ambassador to the US.

In his op-ed, Ijaz claimed that he had drafted the memo on Zardari's instructions with assistance from Haqqani. Ijaz is a Pakistani-American businessman and lobbyist with alleged connections to Washington. "A self-proclaimed investment banker and a political gadabout, Ijaz has dubious claims as a player in conflict resolution going back to the Bill Clinton era," according to the *Times of India*. "He is also buddies with James Woolsey, a former CIA director, and has made a few TV appearances and written some op-eds on Pakistan, usually critical of the country, its military, and its policies."

In his op-ed, Ijaz stated that a "senior Pakistani diplomat," later revealed to be Haqqani, contacted him with an urgent request a week after the US raid on bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad. "The embarrassment of bin Laden being found on Pakistani soil had humiliated Mr. Zardari's weak civilian government to such an extent that the president feared a military takeover was imminent," wrote Ijaz. "He (Zardari) needed an American fist on his army chief's desk to end any misguided notions of a coup—and fast."

Ijaz wrote that General Kayani and Pakistan's troops were "demoralized" by the ease with which the US had violated the country's sovereignty. He claimed that both the army and the ISI were attempting to scapegoat Zardari.

Ijaz stated that Haqqani made it clear to him that the message was to be delivered to Admiral Mullen, a "time-tested friend" of Pakistan, who could forcefully convey the message to both US President Barack Obama and General Kayani. "In a flurry of phone calls and emails over two days," wrote Ijaz in the *Financial Times*, "a memorandum was crafted that included a critical offer from the Pakistani president to the Obama administration."

Pakistan's military and intelligence apparatus has reportedly always been suspicious of Haqqani. The former journalist has long been critical of the ISI and its links with militant Islamist groups. Following Ijaz's disclosure of the memo, the military pressured the government to make Haqqani face an inquiry.

Former US national security advisor James Jones has said that he personally delivered the memo to Admiral Mullen. Mullen initially denied any knowledge of the memo, but later admitted he did see it, but did not believe it to be credible.

Ijaz, for his part, said in his op-ed that Mullen never acted on the memo.

According to Ijaz, ISI chief Ahmad Shuja Pasha confirmed the authenticity of the memo when he met with him in London on October 22.

Haqanni has vehemently denied Ijaz's story from start to finish, accusing the businessman of setting him up while seeking to increase tension between Washington and Islamabad.

The memo begins by warning that the bin Laden raid has sparked a severe political crisis and that both the military intelligence apparatus and the civilian government are accusing each other of being responsible for the raid and its consequences. "Civilians cannot withstand much more of the hard pressure being delivered from the Army to succumb to wholesale changes," states the memo. "If civilians are forced from power, Pakistan becomes a sanctuary for UBL [Bin Laden]'s legacy and potentially the platform for far more rapid spread of al Qaeda's brand of fanaticism and terror. A unique window of opportunity exists for the civilians to gain the

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upper hand over army and intelligence directorates due to their complicity in the UBL matter."

The memo's authors request Washington's direct intervention in conveying a strong message to General Kayani that the military must refrain from ousting the civilian government. "Should you be willing to do so," claims the memo, Washington's political/military backing would result in a "wholesale revamp[ing] of the civilian government" with "the national security adviser and other national security officials" replaced by "trusted advisers that include ex-military and civilian leaders favorably viewed by Washington."

In addition to a new national security team committed to advancing US interests in Pakistan and the region, the memo offers an array of policy concessions to placate Washington. These include: ordering an independent inquiry to investigate allegations that Pakistan harbored and provided assistance to Osama bin Laden and other Al Qaeda operatives; handing over those left in the leadership of Al Qaeda and other militant groups operating on Pakistani soil, or giving US military forces a "green light" to conduct the necessary operations to capture or kill them; and eliminating "Section S" of the ISI, which has been accused of maintaining close relations with the Afghan Taliban.

The memo also says Islamabad would be willing to give the US unprecedented oversight over the country's nuclear weapons program. While the US has effectively recognized India as a nuclear weapons state and negotiated a special status for India in the world nuclear regulatory regime that allows it to access civilian nuclear technology and fuel, it remains hostile toward and gravely suspicious of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program.

The memo scandal raises many questions. For example, why would Haqqani use Ijaz to deliver the memo, when he himself enjoyed direct access to the highest levels of the US government? And what motivated Ijaz's decision to suddenly expose Haqqani in his op-ed for the *Financial Times* after first delivering the memo?

There is no doubt the memo affair is bound up with the ongoing power struggle between the Pakistani military and the civilian government over who manages relations with the US. Moreover, repeated US violations of Pakistani sovereignty and increasingly explicit threats against the country have exacerbated divisions within the Pakistani bourgeoisie. One possibility is that the Pakistani military or ISI got wind of the secret memo and misattributed its source so as to get rid of Haqqani and intensify pressure on the PPP-led civilian government.

Whatever the truth may be, the memo scandal will undoubtedly add to the strain on relations between Washington and Islamabad, intensify the power struggle between the military and civilian government, and further destabilize an already weak and widely despised PPP government.

Nawaz Sharif, the unchallenged leader of the Pakistan Muslim League (N), is predictably using the memo scandal as an opportunity to posture as a defender of Pakistani sovereignty and curry favor with the military. On November 23, Sharif filed a petition in the Supreme Court requesting it to investigate what he called a "dreadful conspiracy" against Pakistan's armed forces. "The culprits exhibiting grave disloyalty to the state and the people of Pakistan and who are found guilty of the crimes should be brought to book," he said at the time.

Sharif's declarations are hypocritical. He has demonstrated his willingness to participate in the US-led "war on terror" and would be more than willing to strike a deal to prosecute the AfPak war in alliance with Washington were the opportunity to present itself.

On Wednesday, the Supreme Court gave the respondents in the memo scandal 15 days to submit their evidence to the top court. The respondents include President Zardari, General Kayani and ISI chief Shuja Pasha.

Over the past decade, Pakistan has served as the linchpin of the neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan. Under orders from Washington, the Pakistani military has waged a ruthless counterinsurgency war in the northwest tribal areas since 2004, using carpet-bombing, torture, extrajudicial killings, and collective punishment to intimidate the local population. The three-and-a-half-year-old PPP government has drastically escalated counterinsurgency operations and has allowed the US to terrorize the tribal areas with stepped up illegal drone attacks.

While it is not known at this point whether there is truth to Ijaz's claims, they do accord with certain key aspects of the Pakistani political equation.

The Pakistan military has a decades-long client-patron partnership with US imperialism, with Washington backstopping a succession of right-wing dictatorships. Since coming to power in 2008, Zardari and his PPP have sought to win Washington's favor, hoping to persuade it to help reduce the military's political power by proving itself a more eager and reliable ally in prosecuting the AfPak War.

The Obama administration and Pentagon have nonetheless shown that, whatever their frictions with the Pakistani military, they view it as their preferred partner because of its decades-long record of serving US geo-political interests in the region and because they deem it a more dependable bulwark in suppressing the working class.

The PPP's courting of US imperialism as a counterweight to the military stretches back decades and flows directly from the bourgeois class interests it defends. During the 1980s, Benazir Bhutto, Zardari's assassinated wife and predecessor as head of the PPP, held negotiations with the Reagan administration as opposition to General Zia's regime grew, promising full support to the US drive to overthrow the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul.

More recently, when opposition to the US-backed Musharraf dictatorship was at its height, Bhutto made it clear that the PPP would not lead or support a mass movement against the regime for fear that it would radicalize the working class and escape the control of the bourgeois parties. Instead, she courted the Bush administration and pledged that the PPP would pursue the Afghan war more aggressively than the Musharraf dictatorship. Ultimately, a tentative deal was struck, with the PPP enabling Musharraf to stage his "re-election" as president, but it fell apart when elements in Musharraf's camp reneged and instead orchestrated Bhutto's assassination.

Zardari and the PPP government have nonetheless made good on Bhutto's promises to the Bush administration, escalating counter-insurgency operations far beyond anything seen under the dictator Musharraf.

The struggle for democracy in Pakistan must take the form of a working class-led political struggle against all the bourgeois parties and the moribund capitalist system they defend and be based on uncompromising opposition to the Afghan War and US and world imperialism.

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