

Pakistan's president delivers annual address amid swirl of economic and political crises

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Asif Ali Zardari, Pakistan's president and the co-leader of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), delivered his fifth annual presidential address to a joint session of Parliament last Saturday amid mounting popular opposition to a PPP-led government that is widely despised for its big business economic "reforms" and its massive escalation of the counterinsurgency war in Pakistan's tribal northwest.

Zardari hyped the supposed "achievements" of the government during his address, describing a Pakistan that the country's workers and toilers would be unable to recognize.

Seeking to exploit the widespread opposition to the PPP, politicians from Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (N) disrupted the speech by chanting slogans against Zardari and eventually walked out.

During his speech, Zardari reiterated the government's determination to mend relations with Washington, which plunged into crisis last November after a NATO airstrike on two Pakistani border posts near the Afghan border that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers. "Pakistan-U.S. relations are multidimensional and important" and they should be based on mutual respect, declared Zardari. He added that Pakistan wants to "engage meaningfully with the U.S."

Both Washington and Islamabad have been maneuvering to resume full and open cooperation in the reactionary AfPak War—in defiance of the wishes of ordinary Pakistanis. On Tuesday, Pakistan's Parliament began debating recommendations on the country's terms of engagement with the US, with the government expected to share the review with Washington by the end of the month.

The Parliamentary Committee on National Security said that Pakistan must demand an apology over the airstrike. The committee also called for an end to illegal US drone attacks. Although the government has routinely criticized the drone strikes, it is an open secret that it and the

military have for years tacitly supported them, including allowing the CIA, up until last December, to mount them from a military base within Pakistan.

Pakistan has indicated it will reopen the land-supply routes to occupying forces in Afghanistan, which were closed as a retaliatory measure in response to the NATO airstrikes, but on the condition that the US and its allies pay increased transit fees.

On Tuesday, it was reported that Washington plans to offer a formal public apology over the airstrike. A senior PPP official told the *Express Tribune* that the apology will come from the "highest level" and will be made during or soon after the joint session of Parliament. Another official said the government was seeking a formal apology to appease the growing public anger over the war, particularly among rank-and-file Pakistani soldiers. "The US step may be symbolic but the government needs [an apology] to save its face, so it can get on with business as usual," the official told *The Express Tribune*.

In his address, Zardari claimed that Pakistan's economy has begun to improve under the PPP and that the government has successfully implemented policies to address mass poverty and unemployment. "We have tried to manage the economy with one primary focus: to ensure that the benefits reach the common man," he declared.

Zardari's speech also included a personal apology to the Baloch people for "mistakes of the past," an indication of the growing concern with which the Pakistani elite views the increasingly deadly nationalist-separatist insurgency in Balochistan, the country's poorest province. Zardari pledged that the government would step up efforts to achieve "political reconciliation" with Baloch nationalists. The PPP government is entirely complicit in the savage crackdown on Baloch nationalist groups, having allowed Pakistan's security services to carry out atrocities against the nationalists with impunity.

Zardari touted his fifth address as a “landmark achievement,” in reference to Pakistan’s long history of political instability and military dictatorships. “The world can see the march of democracy goes on,” he declared. “We are creating history. While a lot more needs to be done, we Pakistanis can be proud of our young democracy.”

The reactionary record of the PPP government, however, demonstrates that the difference between military and civilian rule in Pakistan is largely one of appearances.

The counterinsurgency war in northwest tribal areas first launched under the US-backed dictator Pervez Musharraf in 2004 was dramatically escalated following the coming to power of the PPP in 2008. The government has facilitated illegal US drone attacks that have killed scores of civilians and terrorized the tribal areas.

When NATO carried out its deadly attack on Pakistani troops last November, the PPP government resorted to tough-sounding rhetoric amid a groundswell of anti-US sentiment throughout the country. However, it wasn’t long before reports in the Pakistani and American media revealed that Islamabad was actively working towards resuming full and open cooperation with Washington. Indeed, while sections of the Pakistani elite are resentful over US bullying tactics and repeated infringements of Pakistani sovereignty, the decades-old alliance with Washington remains central to the Pakistani bourgeoisie’s geo-political and class strategy.

Zardari’s claims that the PPP restored democracy to the Pakistani people are utterly fraudulent. Terrified that a popular challenge to the Musharraf’s dictatorship would escape its political control and radicalize the masses, Zardari’s wife and the life chairman of the PPP, Benazir Bhutto, solicited the support of the Bush administration, offering it help in propping up a reconfigured Musharraf presidency and pledging that a PPP-led civilian government would be a more aggressive partner in conducting the neo-colonial AfPak War.

Over the past four years, the PPP has not only made good on this promise, it has repeatedly kowtowed to Pakistan’s military-intelligence apparatus. The government’s initial attempts to limit the influence of the military were feeble and quickly abandoned. In 2008, Zardari tried to bring the ISI, the military intelligence agency, under the control of the Interior Ministry, but he abruptly backed down at the first sign of opposition. Zardari also sought to appease the military by giving extensions to both the army chief Parvez Kayani and the

ISI Director-General Ahmad Shuja Pasha. Eventually, the PPP entered into an alliance with the Pakistan Muslim League (Q), which had been established in 2002 with Musharraf’s support so as to provide the military dictatorship with a civilian fig leaf.

In addition to its escalation of the war, the PPP is despised by the working class and rural toilers for its draconian austerity measures and right-wing economic “reforms.” The federal government has repeatedly increased military spending while reducing expenditure on development. The government reduced the development budget by 100 billion Pakistani rupees (\$1.1 billion) earlier this year, more than a third of the total development budget. Islamabad continues to spend less than 2 percent of GDP on education, and an even smaller amount on health care.

Mass unemployment plagues the working class, spurred on by Pakistan’s worsening energy crisis, privatization, and other austerity measures. The price of basic food items increased by 79 percent over the past four years, according to a biannual report on the Change in Cost of Food Basket (July-December 2011).

The callous disregard of the PPP and the venal Pakistani elite for the lives of ordinary Pakistanis was perhaps best demonstrated by its pitiful response to the floods that ravaged Pakistan in 2010 and 2011. While nearly 2,000 people perished during the 2010 floods and 20 million were affected, the government took no action to prevent a similar disaster from reoccurring. When floods again engulfed Pakistan last year, millions of Pakistanis were left to fend for themselves just as they had been a year earlier. Six months after last year’s floods, approximately 2.5 million people across Sindh and Balochistan remain in need of shelter items, clean water and health care services. According to Save the Children, the flooding has exacerbated hunger in Pakistan, with rates of malnutrition in flood-affected areas now comparable to those in Sub-Saharan Africa.



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