

# Pakistani government breaks up protests against the US

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Last Friday, Pakistani police and paramilitary forces violently broke up protests by hundreds of thousands of people against the anti-Islamic *Innocence of Muslims* video. Police left 23 dead and injured more than 200. The protests in Pakistan came as outrage erupted throughout the Muslim world over this video.

The mass response to the protests reflected the seething anger among the Pakistani people against American imperialism. Washington is occupying Afghanistan and since 2009 has expanded the war into neighbouring Pakistan, with the collaboration of the Pakistani government in Islamabad.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) led-government declared Friday as a special public holiday, naming it a "Day of Love for the Prophet," supposedly with the aim of "facilitating" participation in the protests. Having taken this action aiming to contain mass anger, the government then unleashed a brutal crackdown on demonstrators, fearing that the protest could potentially turn against foreign diplomats or the Pakistani government itself.

Major protests took place in Islamabad, Pakistan's commercial hub of Karachi, Lahore, Rawalpindi and Peshawar, near the western border with Afghanistan.

Islamabad Police Chief Bin Yamin Khan said 50,000 to 60,000 people participated in the protest there. Paramilitary and military helicopters were also deployed in Islamabad, where the diplomatic enclave is located. Five people were killed there and 60 injured.

In Karachi, police shot dead 11 people and injured at least 80. Three policemen also died in clashes there. In Mardan, near Peshawar, more than 50,000 people participated in a demonstration.

Interior Minister Rehman Malik warned that "stern action" would be taken against "culprits" who carried

out violence. Police arrested hundreds of people in the crackdown.

On Saturday, courts in Rawalpindi, Karachi and Lahore ordered to remand at least 185 people produced by the police, the Pakistani daily *Dawn* reported.

Police said that more than 6,000 people would be booked for rioting, and that they were searching video footage to carry out more arrests.

The PPP-led government plans to use the Anti-Terrorism Act of 1997 to charge those arrested. For instance, Karachi anti-terrorism courts put more than 100 people in remand or police custody. All those arrested could be charged for attempted murder, rioting and using firearms, obstructing public servants, and damaging public and private property.

If found guilty, suspects could be jailed for two to three years for rioting and three to ten years for possession of illegal arms. Under the Terrorism Act, those convicted of murder or attempted murder could be given the death sentence or life imprisonment.

Knowing that anger among the Pakistani people could erupt against the US, the Obama administration spent \$70,000 to buy advertisements on seven TV channels in Pakistan distancing Washington from the anti-Islam video. This advertisement carried statements by US President Barack Obama and US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton criticizing the film.

However, broad opposition among Pakistani people against the US and its "AfPak" war is deepgoing. The US led war in Afghanistan has been expanded to Pakistan border areas to suppress popular opposition against occupying NATO forces and the puppet regime in Kabul. The US forces frequently carry out deadly drone attacks in the country's western border with Afghanistan, killing civilians at will and violating Pakistan sovereignty.

In May of last year, the US launched a raid to kill Osama bin Laden inside Pakistan in blatant violation of Pakistani sovereignty, provoking mass protests. Mass protests were sparked by the US air attack last November on a Pakistan military outpost located in the border area, killing 24 soldiers and forcing the government to close down supply lines to NATO forces. Only in July was it able to allow supplies to resume.

The Pakistani government's call for a day of protest exposes its hypocrisy and desperate manoeuvring as it seeks to channel popular outrage along Islamist lines. Information Minister Qamar Zaman Kaira boasted that Pakistan was the only country that declared a day of protest.

Ghulam Ahmad Bilour, the railway minister, offered \$100,000 from his personal money for anyone who murdered the director of the video, inviting the Taliban and Al Qaeda to do the job. The government later dissociated itself from the minister's call.

The PPP-led government of President Asif Ali Zardari have continued Pakistan's backing for the US neo-colonial war in Afghanistan that started under military dictator Pervez Musharraf in 2001. While making timid criticisms of US violations of Pakistani sovereignty, the Pakistani government and military have repeatedly bowed to US demands.

While allowing CIA drone attacks to proceed inside Pakistan, Islamabad has launched major military operations in Pakistan at Washington's behest to suppress popular opposition to the war. In the past several months, the Pentagon has pressed the Pakistani military to launch fresh operations in North Waziristan to crush anti-US insurgents.

The government is discredited not only due to its support for the US war. The PPP-led government is implementing austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund to heap the burden of deepening crisis on the backs of workers and poor. The US is pushing for these economic reforms, including privatisation.

In the past several months, Islamabad has been busy mending fences with the US after the diplomatic spat that followed the US killing of Pakistani soldiers last November. On Monday, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari met US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. A senior spokesman told the media that the situation was

“moving upwards, in a positive direction.”

Similarly, last week Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar made an official four-day visit to Washington to discuss improving US-Pakistani relations.



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