

Amid deepening crisis, Pakistan announces May general election

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In accordance with Pakistan's constitution, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) led coalition government stepped down on March 16, when the National Assembly, the lower house of Pakistan's bicameral legislature, completed its five year-term and was dissolved.

The country's president and the co-chairman of the PPP, Asif Ali Zardari, has announced a general election to elect a new National Assembly on May 11. New elections are also to be held to elect the country's four provincial assemblies, although the country's election commission has yet to set their date.

In the interim, Pakistan is to be governed by a caretaker government comprised of technocrats. But in a further expression of the deep fissures and distrust within the ruling elite, the government and the opposition parties have failed to agree on who should serve as prime minister, despite weeks of first unofficial and then formal consultations. On Friday, a bi-partisan parliamentary commission announced that it had exhausted its three-day time limit to reach a consensus choice for interim prime minister.

The Election Commission will now be tasked with choosing the interim Prime Minister from a list of four nominees, two proposed by the government and two by the opposition.

For months political circles in Pakistan have been rife with rumours that the military, the Supreme Court, and the state bureaucracy could prevail on the interim government to delay the elections, citing widespread political, communal and ethnic violence; then use it to push through the privatization program, cuts in price-subsidies, and tax increases the International Monetary Fund has insisted are necessary before Pakistan can receive further loans.

In recent days, however, the Supreme Court has vowed that it will not sanction any delay in the vote and the military has pledged its support for speedy elections.

The outgoing PPP-led government pushed the country deeper into the US-war in Afghanistan and, at the behest of domestic and international big business, increased attacks on the social position of the working class and rural toilers.

In a farewell address to the nation, Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf made short-shrift of the economic crisis and power shortages that plague the lives of ordinary Pakistanis, declaring, "It is true that in the past five years we have not been able to make rivers of milk and honey flow in the country." He then declared the government's completion of its full five year-term—making it the first ever-elected government in Pakistan not to be removed from office through a military coup or by a military-backed presidential dismissal—"an extraordinary and historic achievement."

Ashraf said Pakistan had "a long history of tussle between the democratic and undemocratic forces," but he claimed that thanks to the PPP-led government, which had "used all our resources to strengthen the foundations of democracy," "democracy is so strong that no one will dare to dislodge it in the future."

Ashraf's failure to name who these "undemocratic forces" were was no oversight.

The PPP-led civilian government has connived with all the forces that have sustained the succession of military dictatorships that have directly ruled Pakistan for half of its history—beginning with U.S. imperialism—and has done so with the aim of upholding a brutal capitalist order where a tiny big business and landlord elite grow ever wealthier by savagely exploiting the workers and toilers and by looting the state. For all its bluster about entrenching democracy, the PPP government never sought to prosecute a single military or government official for their role in sustaining the almost decade-long dictatorship of General Pervez Musharraf; welcomed into its coalition, the Pakistan Muslim League (Q), the party established by Musharraf to give his dictatorship a civilian fig-leaf; and allowed the military to continue to control the country's foreign policy and national security policies, to say nothing of a huge budget and a sizeable swathe of the country's economy.

To be sure, over the past five years the PPP-led civilian government had numerous tussles with the military and the Supreme Court, an institution with a long history of giving its imprimatur to military coups. But what was at stake in

these battles was not the democratic aspirations of the Pakistani people, but internecine battles over pelf and power and how best to uphold the mercenary interests of the Pakistani ruling class.

The five years of the PPP-led government shows that from the standpoint of the masses and their democratic and social aspirations the difference between elected Pakistani bourgeois rule and military government is largely window-dressing.

Its claims to stand for democracy notwithstanding, the PPP-led government continued the policies of Musharraf, particularly its backing for the U.S. war in Afghanistan. Under Zardari, Ashraf and his predecessor as prime minister, Yousaf Raza Gilani, Pakistan mounted military operations in the Swat Valley and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) against Taliban-aligned forces that resulted in villages being flattened and millions being forced to flee for their lives. It also secretly gave the green light for the CIA to carry out hundreds of drone attacks in FATA in which thousands have died.

The Pakistani state's bloody suppression of Baloch separatist groups, using kidnappings, torture and extrajudicial killings further repudiates the PPP's claims to have led a democratic transformation. Another element in the "dirty war" in Balochistan is the promotion of Sunni fundamentalist militia who have carried out a wave of target-killings of members of the Shia Hazare community. This year alone, several hundred Hazare have been killed in Balochistan. Former Balochistan Chief Minister and PPP leader Nawab Aslam Raisani openly expressed his contempt towards the country's Shia minority when he declared the killing of 40 Hazaras in 2011 to have been "no big deal."

The PPP government also pressed forward with the pro-market reforms initiated under Musharraf, implementing an IMF restructuring program and otherwise attacking the living standards of working people.

Since 2008 consumer prices have increased around 80 per cent according to official statistics, driving millions into poverty and outright hunger. According to the National Nutrition Survey, 58 percent of the population was food insecure in 2011, up 10 percentage points from just two years before, and a staggering 29.6 per cent were suffering from hunger or severe hunger. Yet, the government has allotted the equivalent of just 1.86 per cent of Pakistan's gross domestic product to welfare programs. Education and health care are similarly neglected.

The government's utter subservience to big businesses was graphically revealed in the intervention Ashraf made last December to get murder charges dropped against the Karachi factory owners whose violations of the most minimal safety standards had led to the deaths of almost 300

textile workers in a September, 2012 factory fire. Various business lobby groups chambers had demanded the charges be dropped, saying that otherwise it would discourage investment.

The protests against the US's violation of Pakistan sovereignty and the government's austerity measures made by the major opposition parties—the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), the Tehrik-i-Insafi of Pakistan (PTI) and the Islamic fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami and JUI (F)—are a transparent attempt to exploit the mass popular anger.

When in power the PML-N implemented IMF restructuring programmes and it has repeatedly declared its support for the US war in Afghanistan. PTI leader Imran Khan makes rhetorical criticisms of the US occupation of Afghanistan and drone strikes in FATA, but insists he is ready to work with the US.

Last year the then US ambassador to Islamabad Cameron Munter told the *Express Tribune*: "I've met both Imran Khan and Nawaz Sharif, and they have assured me that their parties fully support the United States."

The US has joined in the PPP-initiated celebration of Pakistani "democracy," with State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland calling the Pakistani parliament's completion of its full term "truly historic."

Later in her statement Nuland signalled Washington's confidence in the Pakistani military, with which it has publicly resumed close collaboration in recent months, and all the parties of the Pakistani bourgeoisie, declaring that the US "will be able to work well" on "security and counterterrorism, [and] economic development" with whatever government emerges after the elections.



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