

Detention of ex-dictator Musharraf adds to tensions in Pakistan

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The detention of former U.S.-backed dictator General Pervez Musharraf on treason charges has been extended by an Islamabad anti-terrorism court until May 18.

However, the country's election-period caretaker government has refused to back Musharraf's prosecution saying that it is constitutionally-mandated to "avoid taking any controversial step." Under Pakistani law, only the government can lay treason charges.

Musharraf was arrested on April 19 for his November 2007 imposition of emergency rule and the sacking and placing under house arrest of the Chief Justice of the Pakistan Supreme Court and other top judges.

Musharraf also faces criminal charges in several other high profile cases. These include his involvement in the December 2007 assassination of Benazir Bhutto, a former prime minister and the life chairperson of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), and the August 2006 military assault that killed Nawab Akbar Bugti. A former Balochistan governor and tribal leader, Bugti was accused by the government of leading a Balochi nationalist rebellion against the Pakistani state.

Musharraf returned to Pakistan in March after four-years in self-exile, proclaiming his intention to contest the May 11 National Assembly elections as the leader of the party he founded in 2010, the All-Pakistan Muslim League. But election authorities and the courts rejected his applications to contest from four constituencies, citing the many criminal cases against him.

Last Friday the chief prosecutor for Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency, Chaudhry Zulfiqar Ali, was ambushed and killed by unidentified gunmen while driving to his Islamabad office. Ali was handling several important cases including those arising from Bhutto's assassination and the alleged involvement of seven members of Lashkar-e-Taiba, an Islamacist group with ties to sections of Pakistan's national-security apparatus, in the November 2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai, India.

Ali had reportedly requested increased security last month, citing death threats he had received after indicting Musharraf and several other retired generals for aiding and abetting Bhutto's assassination by failing to provide her with proper security. According to the BBC, Ali's attempts to initiate Musharraf's arrest in the Bhutto case "angered some quarters in the military."

The campaign for the May 11 National Assembly and provincial elections is taking place under conditions of extreme political crisis and mounting violence. U.S. imperialism's unleashing of deadly drone attacks in Pakistan's northwest and relentless pressure on Pakistan to bear more of the brunt of its AfPak War have plunged much of the impoverished country into civil war.

The Afghan Taliban-aligned Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has launched attacks targeting the PPP, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement and Awami National Party—the partners in the previous ruling coalition, which expanded Pakistan's support for the US war in Afghanistan. As a result, these parties have cancelled most rallies and other large election events. In Balochistan, ethno-separatist insurgents have attacked election offices and candidates.

On Monday, a bomb blast in Kurram, one of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, killed 24 people attending an election rally called by the Islamic fundamentalist Jamiat Ulema e Islam (JUI). The TTP claimed responsibility for the attack, saying that the local JUI candidate had betrayed its members to US agents, i.e. Pakistani security forces. And on Tuesday, two bombings in the predominantly-Pashtun Khyber Pakhtunkwa province killed ten people attending a rally put on by another Islamic fundamentalist party, the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam Fazl, and six people attending a PPP campaign event. Musharraf is currently being held under house arrest at his 6000-acre farm.

The caretaker government's refusal to file treason

charges against him is because of its fears of how the military—which continues to wield vast political and economic power and effectively controls the country’s foreign and national security policies—will respond to the prosecution of someone who headed Pakistan’s armed forces for nine years.

One of Pakistan’s principal dailies, *Dawn*, reported that on April 27 a delegation of 75 officers from a military college in Quetta met the chairman of the Senate standing committee on defence, Mushahid Hussain Sayed, to express their opposition to Musharraf’s arrest and also to politicians “criticising” the military in election meetings.

The military, from all reports, tried to dissuade Musharraf from returning to Pakistan, for they well recognized that he is a spent force—popularly discredited for suppressing basic democratic rights, for presiding over pro-market policies that led to increased economic insecurity and poverty, and for his role in facilitating the war on Afghanistan and U.S.-drone strikes in Pakistan, and in ordering brutal military campaigns against Balochi nationalist insurgents and Taliban-aligned groups in the tribal belt bordering Afghanistan.

However, the military top brass cannot be indifferent to Musharraf’s fate, without risking its own prestige and power. Most of the current leadership—including General Kiyani, the current army chief, and at least nine corps commanders—were promoted to leadership positions by Musharraf. And during the eight years he served as Pakistan’s “chief executive” and president, the military greatly extended its economic power.

Pakistan’s political parties have all expressed their support for Musharraf’s prosecution, which they well recognize enjoys overwhelming popular support.

But the political establishment and the judiciary are themselves all complicit in his crimes and all uphold the military and the reactionary Pakistan-US military-strategic alliance as bulwarks of the class rule of the bourgeoisie.

The PPP and Imran Khan and his PakistanTehreek-e-Insaf welcomed Musharraf’s 1999 coup. In 2007, Benazir Bhutto and her PPP helped Musharraf stage his phony “re-election” as President under a Bush administration brokered-deal. The deal subsequently unravelled, because Musharraf and the clique around him balked at parting with any real power, but it called for Bhutto to serve as the General’s Prime Minister with the aim of shoring up his regime and expanding Pakistan’s support for the Afghan war

Nawaz Sharif, head of the Pakistan Muslim League

(Nawaz), has never forgiven Musharraf for ousting him from power in 1999. But he himself is a political protégé of Pakistan’s previous military strongman and the architect of its reactionary “Islamization” policy, General Zia ul-Huq.

As for Supreme Court Justice Muhammad Iftikhar Chaudry, while he had a falling out with Musharraf in 2007—that is in the eighth year of his regime—he had earlier joined with the other top justices in giving a constitutional fig-leaf to Musharraf’s coup. And he was elevated to his post as head of the Supreme Court by none other than the general himself.

Officially the military has said nothing about Musharraf’s arrest. But speaking at a ceremony to mark Pakistan’s military “martyrs” April 30, Kiyani declared: “If we succeed in rising above all ethnic, linguistic and sectarian biases to vote solely on the basis of ... merit and competence, there would be no reason to fear dictatorships.” The military has routinely invoked the incompetence and corruption of civilian governments to justify its seizure of power.

On May 2, Pakistan’s *The Nation* cited reliable sources to report that a five-member US Congressional delegation led by Senator Joe Donnelly and the US Ambassador to Pakistan, Richard Olson, had held a secret meeting with Musharraf at his sub-jail residence. According to the report Musharraf wanted a “graceful exit” from Pakistan. The delegation is said to have later met with government leaders and General Kiyani.

The US embassy has denied any meeting with Musharraf occurred but the newspaper stands by its report.

US imperialism has many reasons to want a quick and safe exit for Musharraf. He rendered it many services, including allowing Pakistan to be used as the site of CIA offshore torture chambers. Even more importantly, at a time when Washington is seeking to make a major shift in the AfPak war—with US forces in Afghanistan to be drawn down and the puppet regime in Kabul reconfigured—and Pakistan is beset by crisis, it is determined to strengthen its decades long partnership with the Pakistani military.



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