

# Pakistani court issues arrest warrant for ex-military dictator

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A Pakistani court yesterday issued an arrest warrant for the former US-backed military strongman Pervez Musharraf, who is on trial for treason over his imposition of a state of emergency in 2007. The court hearing the case, a special treason tribunal, also refused to allow him to travel abroad for medical treatment for a heart condition that he complained of suffering while travelling to the tribunal on January 2.

Musharraf was summoned to appear before the tribunal on December 24, but has yet to face the court due to security and health concerns. He is currently at the Armed Forces Institute of Cardiology, which recommended that he seek specialist treatment overseas. The protracted process of beginning the trial points to sharp divisions in Pakistani ruling circles, including the military, over the charges.

Musharraf seized power in a military coup in 1999, ousting Nawaz Sharif, who is once again the prime minister today. Musharraf ruled until early 2008. His exit was arranged by the US, amid concerns in Washington about developing mass opposition to the dictator. This paved the way for the return of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who was then assassinated in December 2007 while campaigning for national and regional assembly elections.

Musharraf returned from self-exile last year in a bid to contest the election last May, which was won by Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N). The new government hesitated for months before filing treason charges. In 2007, after suspending the constitution and declaring emergency rule, Musharraf ordered the military to occupy the parliament and the Supreme Court, take private television stations off the air and jail political opponents. Several judges, including the country's chief justice, were sacked. If convicted of treason, Musharraf could face the death

penalty.

Musharraf also faces other charges, including for the murder of Bhutto and a military assault in August 2006 that killed Balochi nationalist leader Nawab Akbar Bugti. He has been granted bail in these cases, and is eligible to be bailed on the latest arrest warrant. The court yesterday, however, insisted it did not have the power to take Musharraf off an "exit control list" preventing him from leaving the country.

Behind the wrangling over Musharraf's fate lie wider differences in the country's ruling elite. Speaking in parliament last June, Sharif declared: "Musharraf has to answer for his misdeeds." His comments were no doubt pitched at deep hostility to the former dictator, both within the PML-N and more broadly. Following the 1999 coup, the military tried and convicted Sharif of "kidnapping, attempted murder, hijacking and terrorism and corruption." He was only allowed to go into exile after an intervention by Saudi Arabia.

Sharif, however, has already indicated that there will be no broader probe into the military under Musharraf's rule. The military has been central to propping up bourgeois rule in Pakistan and has ruled the country for more than half of its existence. Sharif is acutely aware that he cannot afford to alienate the army. During last year's election campaign, he declared: "I don't think the military is responsible for what Musharraf did."

Nevertheless, the charges against Musharraf have raised concerns in the military, to which the ex-dictator has attempted to appeal. Musharraf has denounced the case against him as a "political vendetta." When the hearing began in December, he warned: "When you're doing wrong against an army chief, you're causing disturbances with the military ranks." He claimed that the army was "totally with me on this issue."

The military, which Musharraf acknowledged tried to dissuade him from returning to take part in last year's election, has been largely silent on the trial. However, the fact that Musharraf is being treated at a military facility, which recommended he be sent abroad, indicates that the army would prefer that no trial took place. The *New York Times* last month noted "long-running concerns that the military might defy the civilian authorities to protect" Musharraf.

Musharraf's lawyers have appealed to the United Nations, as well as the US, UK and Saudi Arabia, to intervene, saying he would not receive a fair trial in Pakistan. They claimed there was "an obvious conflict of interest" involving the judges in the case, as Musharraf cracked down on the judiciary in 2007.

The US has washed its hands of Musharraf, saying his trial was an "internal matter." The Bush administration relied heavily on Musharraf to facilitate the 2001 US-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Pakistan's withdrawal of support for the Taliban government, which it had helped install, was critical to the Taliban's rapid overthrow. The Musharraf regime also provided supply routes for US forces in Afghanistan and helped track down "terrorist" targets.

Any genuine probe would not only expose the Pakistani military but Washington's involvement in propping up Musharraf and hence its responsibility for his many crimes after the 1999 coup. Such an investigation will certainly not take place under Sharif, who is just as committed to the US and its occupation of Afghanistan as Musharraf was. The current government has turned a blind eye to the CIA's drone war in Pakistani border areas with Afghanistan that has resulted in hundreds of civilian casualties, and has given the green light for air attacks in Pakistan's North Waziristan region.

The Sharif government is heavily dependent on US aid, as well as loans from international agencies such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. It is deepening the assault on the working class and rural poor by implementing the IMF's pro-market economic policies.

Facing growing opposition, the government enacted the Pakistan Protection Ordinance last month, granting extraordinary powers to the security forces. A petition to the Supreme Court, challenging the legislation,

likens it to the Rowlatt Act that extended "emergency measures" to suppress public unrest in British colonial India toward the end of World War I.

The Sharif government is confronting a deepening dilemma over Musharraf's trial. Having raised public expectations that the ex-dictator will face justice, it cannot readily ditch the prosecution. At the same time, the government faces resistance from the military that is clearly concerned that the trial could expose its involvement in Musharraf's crimes and open the way for broader prosecutions.



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