

# Pakistan's government mobilises the army in Islamabad

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29 July 2014

Pakistan's government last Friday invoked constitutional provision 245 to mobilise the military to "maintain law and order" in Islamabad, the capital, for three months from August 1. Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan said the army would also be deployed in other cities if necessary.

This anti-democratic move by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's government amounts to establishing military rule in the capital. The government claims there are "terrorist" threats to Islamabad following its military offensive in North Waziristan against Taliban forces, but the mobilisation in the capital is clearly also directed against working class struggles.

Constitutional provision 245 allows the military to be deployed domestically "in aid of civil power," as well as to defend Pakistan against external aggression or threat of war. No such government order can be challenged in any court, and the courts have no jurisdiction in areas subjected to military deployment.

This means that all civil liberties are suspended while the military enjoys immunity for its operations. Ali Khan said the decision was taken "in consultation with the military"—an indication of the army's political power.

In a flimsy effort to justify the move, Ali Khan declared yesterday there were "threats to key political leaders." He added that the decision was not unusual, because provision 245 had been invoked 11 times in the past seven years, and the military had previously been deployed at key installations.

At the same time, Ali Khan admitted that 352 troops had already been deployed in Islamabad, operating under the 1997 Anti-Terrorism Act. This Act was amended early this year to give wide powers to the military.

There was media speculation that the government

would "reconsider" the decision after facing criticism, but the prime minister's office yesterday dismissed such suggestions.

The military is carrying out a major offensive, now into its second month, deploying more than 150,000 ground forces, backed by air strikes, in North Waziristan, the mountainous northwest region of Pakistan, bordering Afghanistan.

Although the offensive is supposedly directed against Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) fighters, nearly one million people have been made refugees without adequate food, water and medicine. The military claims to have killed around 500 TTP cadres. The extent of casualties, including civilians, has not been independently verified as the media has been barred from the area.

The US government has for a long time demanded this offensive, which is being conducted in coordination with US drone strikes. On July 19, a drone attack killed 11 people, with the US claiming they were TTP leaders, just four days after 15 people were murdered in a similar strike.

Sharif's special assistant on foreign affairs, Syed Tariq Fatemi met with US Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns last Thursday to review the offensive. This operation is seeking to crush not just the TTP but the widespread opposition in Pakistan, particularly in the border areas, to the ongoing US occupation of Afghanistan.

One of the official opposition parties, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), led by Imran Khan, accused the government of deploying the military to suppress a march scheduled for August 14. The PTI planned the march, called *Azadi* or freedom, with several other parties to protest against vote rigging in last year's general election and to demand a recount.

Under the guise of defending democratic rights, the march had been organised to exploit the deepening popular discontent with the government. Last month, Khan's party passed a resolution supporting the military offensive in North Waziristan. Khan only criticised the government for seeking a direct clash with his party. Nevertheless, the government fears that any protest, even by another establishment party, will intensify the instability in the country.

Opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP) spokesman Senator Farhatullah Babar opposed calling out the military, warning that "the decision is pregnant with serious consequences for people and the country as it means not only a failure of the civil administration but also the total suspension of the jurisdiction of the high courts." However, previous PPP-led governments have used the same law to curb democratic rights.

Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government is concerned that draconian austerity measures prescribed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) will fuel working class unrest. Early this month, after the government agreed to privatisations and other far-reaching social attacks, the IMF approved a \$US555.9 million instalment of a \$6.7 billion bailout program approved last year. The IMF had earlier delayed talks on the instalment in order to force the Sharif government to comply.

Energy sector restructuring now must be implemented to make room for private power companies, a financial advisor must be appointed to prepare to sell off Pakistani International Airline and government spending must be reduced further this financial year. The rupee is expected to fall by another 13 percent as a result, fuelling inflation. Last year, economic growth dipped to 3.3 percent.

Yesterday's *Express Tribune* commented that the "PML-N has tasted the successes of invoking article 245 in 1998 and 1999 in dealing with troubles in Karachi and revamping WAPDA [the Water and Power Development Authority]. Temptation to use it again for an easy fix was perhaps too hard to resist." WAPDA, a major government-owned enterprise, was restructured during the late 1990s, with the military deployed to curb resistance.

Confronted by a political and economic crisis, Sharif is mending his relations with the military. Sharif was forced to abandon so-called peace talks with the

Pakistan Taliban after the military opposed the negotiations. The armed forces hierarchy was also angered by the government's prosecution of former military ruler Pervez Musharraf, and by the government's support for Geo TV, a Dubai-based Pakistani news channel, which blamed military intelligence for the shooting of one of its correspondents, Hamid Mir.

According to an article in the *Dawn*: "Sharif's close aides and colleagues are claiming that the party leadership has mended its relationship with the military establishment." The report referred to Sharif's visit last week to army headquarters to celebrate an Islamic religious function and to his extended talks with the military hierarchy.

Whatever the exact discussions, Sharif has been compelled to seek the military's support, assisting it to reassert its authority in Pakistani politics. Since 1947, when Pakistan was carved out of the Indian sub-continent on a communal basis, the military has taken power time and again, in order to maintain capitalist rule.



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