

Pakistani opposition parties launch anti-government protest

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The Pakistani government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif yesterday permitted large protest convoys, organised by two bourgeois opposition parties, to head toward the capital of Islamabad while imposing tight security and warning of a crackdown in the event of violence.

Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the Pakistan Awami Tehrik (PAT), a small right-wing political group of Canadian-based Islamic cleric Tahir ul-Qadri, called the "Freedom March" on the August 14 anniversary of the end of British colonial rule in 1947, to demand Sharif's resignation.

Thousands of protesters started the convoys yesterday from Lahore, the capital of Pakistan's Punjab province, aiming to reach the country's capital, 350 kilometres away, by today. The PTI and PAT are calling for the dissolution of the parliament, the establishment of an unelected government of technocrats and new elections.

Both parties claim that the elections held a year ago were "rigged" by Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PMLN). Voting fraud is rampant in Pakistan but such irregularities were unlikely to have produced the PMLN's victory.

Sharif's right-wing party won 190 seats in the 375-member parliament. It capitalised on popular hostility toward the previous Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government's attacks on living conditions, police-state repression and support for the US-led war in Afghanistan and border areas in Pakistan.

The government has mobilised around 25,000 policemen and para-military forces to Lahore and Islamabad. Earlier, it invoked laws to authorise the military to deploy soldiers to "assist" the police and civil administration in Islamabad. It also banned the assembly of people there, giving wide powers to the police. Highway entry points in Lahore and Islamabad

were barricaded, halting vehicular movements.

The PTI and PAT claimed that the police had arrested more than 2,000 activists from the two parties by Wednesday. Earlier, on August 8 and 9, the police killed eight PAT activists when the party tried to hold a separate march.

In a bid to avoid a major confrontation, Sharif declared on Wednesday that he was ready to appoint a committee of three Supreme Court judges to investigate any irregularities in last year's elections. PTI leader Khan refused the offer, however, saying it was "too late" and reiterated his demand for Sharif's resignation and the formation of an interim administration.

In a further step, the government yesterday decided to permit the convoys to take place. Interior Minister Nisar Ali Khan said, "if you want to protest you are welcome," while warning demonstrators "not to take the law" into their hands. The government also ordered the removal of barriers, in order to allow the convoys, except around the "Red Zone" in Islamabad where foreign embassies and the main government offices are located.

The about-face demonstrates the government's nervousness that the deepening political crisis could trigger a social explosion. Other political parties, including the PPP and the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami, had criticised the government's readiness to crush the protest, while not supporting the convoys for fear of igniting wider unrest.

Anxiety in ruling circles about the political tensions was reflected on the stock market in Karachi, the country's main financial city. The share index, which had risen to 31,000—a 68-year high—on July 27, dropped to 28,000 by Monday. On Wednesday, Finance Minister Ishaq Dar warned that the political crisis had already caused stock exchange losses of 300 billion

rupees (\$US3 billion).

Khan's party won 34 seats in last year's parliamentary election and also secured control of the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa provincial administration. However, its primary base of support is among the middle class in the urban centres.

Both Khan and Qadri are seeking to exploit widespread anger over worsening social inequality. Forty percent of people live below the global poverty line of \$US1.25 per day. In urban centres, the wealthiest 20 percent consume 60 percent of total income. The bottom 20 percent share only 5 percent. Youth unemployment is officially 7 percent but that is a severely understated statistic.

Other sources of discontent, over many years, include rampant corruption and electricity supply failures, which hurt ordinary people as well as big business.

On top of this, popular disaffection has grown since the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, after successive Pakistani governments have bowed to Washington's dictates, including for the stepping up of military offensives and drone attacks in the tribal areas along the Afghan border.

Khan declares he is fighting for corruption-free "democratic governance." Qadri claims he wants a "revolution" for poverty alleviation, eradication of corruption, electoral reforms, social rights and women's rights, among other things.

These are utterly fraudulent statements. These capitalist parties have never opposed the International Monetary Fund's austerity program, which every government has implemented, nor Washington's AfPak war. They have supported the ongoing military offensive in North Waziristan, which the US had long pushed for.

Sharif has increasingly rested on the military. He participated in a military-organised Independence Day commemoration and showered praise on the armed forces, including for the North Waziristan offensive, which has killed hundreds of people and displaced about a million.

At a ceremony in the western city of Quetta, Sharif appeared along the army chief, General Raheel. "Can there be a bigger freedom march than Pakistan's civil and military leadership sitting together to celebrate Pakistan's Independence Day?" Sharif declared in his speech.

The military has not issued any statement or offered any hint about its position on the opposition calls for Sharif's resignation. There remains much media speculation, however, that the military is backing the PTI-PAT demonstration.

Since Sharif took office, friction between the government and the military has been apparent. The generals have expressed displeasure over the government's treason case against the former military dictator, Pervez Musharraf.

From 1947 onward, Pakistan has been ruled by military dictatorships for half its history. The last period of direct military government ended in 2008, but the military has retained considerable power and influence behind the scenes.

Under the previous PPP-led coalition government, which was in office between 2008 and 2013, President Asif Zardari quickly ceded control of foreign and security policies to the military.

Washington has backed and worked closely with military dictators in the past but the US ambassador in Islamabad has hinted that the Obama administration is not in favour of a military takeover at this time.



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