

Pakistani military intervenes in political crisis

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The Pakistani army has intervened in the country's political crisis in what has been described by some commentators as a "soft coup." Army chief General Raheel Sharif intervened on Thursday night into the political standoff between the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and ongoing opposition protests calling for his resignation.

The protests organised by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) of former cricketer Imran Khan and the Pakistan Awami Tehrik (PAT) of Canadian-based Islamic cleric Tahir ul-Qadri began on August 15. Protesters have camped near Red Square in Islamabad where the parliament building and main government administrative offices are located. Sharif has held several rounds of talks with Khan and Qadri, but has failed to reach a compromise.

Amid the continuing crisis, Prime Minister Sharif met General Sharif on Thursday for the third time in nine days to discuss the political situation.

The prime minister later denied that he had asked the army to intervene, but everything points to him doing just that. On Friday evening, the military's top public relations official Asim Bajwa tweeted that "the COAS [Chief of Army Staff] was asked by the government to play [a] facilitative role for resolution of current impasse, in yesterday's meeting, at PM House."

According to the prime minister, "The army did not ask to play the role of mediator, neither have we requested them to play such a role." Home Minister Chaudry Nisar Ali Khan made similar denials, apparently to fend off criticisms in the media and from the opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of the government's appeal for the army's intervention.

On Thursday evening, General Sharif summoned opposition leaders Khan and Qadri separately for discussions. Following the talks, Qadri hailed the army's intervention as a victory, saying: "The army chief has asked us to give him 24 hours to solve the

crisis."

Similarly, Khan told his supporters that the army chief has assured him that a judicial commission would be formed to investigate opposition rigging allegations. He claimed that the general had promised to play the role of "neutral umpire." Khan declared a compromise had been reached for Sharif to temporarily step down for 30 days while the investigation proceeds.

The subservience of Khan and Qadri to the military demonstrates that their protests have nothing to do with defending democracy or the social rights of the working people. These capitalist parties are seeking to exploit popular anger over the Sharif government's attacks on living standards, police-state repression and support for the US led occupation in Afghanistan and AfPak war along the border region. Sharif came to power not by massive vote rigging, but by exploiting widespread discontent with the previous PPP government.

Both leaders have watered down their demands in line with the military's call for compromise. Khan is no longer calling for Sharif to permanently step aside. And in recent days, Qadri has focussed solely on demanding punishment for those who ordered the police shooting of his supporters on August 9 that killed eight people. The Lahore police have taken a step in that direction on Thursday by registering a murder case in which ministers, including the prime minister, and police officials are named as suspects. Registration of a case simply means that charges are under consideration. Maintaining the protest on Friday night, Khan and Qadri declared that they were waiting for the Army chief's next move.

Whether or not the government made the request, the intervention of the army into the current political crisis is an ominous sign that further inroads into democratic rights are being prepared. The military has directly ruled Pakistan for much of the time since formal independence in 1947 and has always been a major

influence in Pakistani politics.

Sharif, who was ousted in 1999 in a military coup by former Army General Pervez Musharraf, won last year's election. He claimed he would strengthen the "civilian rule" and was hailed by the bourgeois media for returning Pakistan to democracy. Over the past year, Sharif has sought to marginalise the military from politics, by taking over decision-making on defence matters and indicting Musharraf for treason.

The government's actions have created deep tensions with the military. It appears that army is exploiting the political crisis to reassert its authority in political and defence matters. Earlier in the year, Sharif had pushed for a negotiated settlement with the Tehrik-i-Taliban or Pakistani Taliban. But under pressure from the army and Washington, he gave the green light in June for a major military offensive against the Islamist militia.

It is not clear what concessions Sharif has made to the military for its role in trying to defuse the crisis. However, some commentators have described the military's actions as a "soft coup" that has forced the government to cede powers in foreign affairs and defence issues.

Analyst Ayesha Siddiqi told the *Guardian* that Sharif would now be a "ceremonial prime minister" for the rest of his term. "Any gains made in the last eight years [since Musharraf stood aside] to strengthen democracy have been rolled back," she said.

While the Obama administration has publicly warned against a military coup, it has given its tacit support to the army's intervention into Pakistani political life. US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki declared yesterday that the situation in Pakistan "seemed [to be] moving towards a peaceful resolution."

Washington's formal opposition to a coup is completely cynical. It has backed Pakistani military dictators in the past, including Musharraf, and would do so again. The US is currently supporting army juntas and their suppression of basic democratic rights in Thailand and Egypt.

However, the open seizure of power by the Pakistani military, as opposed to a "soft coup," would trigger US legislation requiring the imposition of sanctions, complicating the close relations between the US and Pakistani armed forces. The US is widely despised in Pakistan where the latest Pew Research Centre polling showed that just 14 percent of people give it a positive

rating and 7 percent have any confidence in President Obama.

Within Pakistan, there are deep concerns within ruling circles that the present political crisis could open the door for far wider opposition from working people. Rampant poverty, social polarisation, attacks on democratic rights, and above all the protracted US-led war in Afghanistan and its extension into Pakistan border has produced seething discontent. That the Sharif government is in strife just a year after winning power is a clear sign of this broader political and social crisis.



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