

Pakistan's military expands its power in wake of Lahore terror attack

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Pakistan's military has seized on last Sunday's terrorist atrocity in Lahore to implement its longstanding plans for an "antiterrorism" offensive in Punjab, the country's most populous province, and to further strengthen its authority over the country's civilian government.

At least 72 people, including 29 children, were killed Sunday when a suicide bomber targeted a park in Lahore, Pakistan's second-largest city and the capital of Punjab province. Responsibility for the bombing, which was aimed at causing maximum civilian casualties and targeted Pakistan's Christian minority, has been claimed by a Pakistan Taliban splinter group, the Jamaat-ul-Ahrar (Assembly of the Free).

The military's offensive has thus far consisted of raids and mass arrests in cities and towns across the Punjab. It involves the army, the ISI (the premier military intelligence agency), and the paramilitary Pakistan Rangers.

It was almost certainly launched by the military high command unilaterally, without informing, let alone securing the agreement of, the civilian Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)-led government.

The *IHS Jane's Intelligence Review* is reporting its sources confirm that "just hours" after the Lahore bomb blast, "Army Chief General Raheel Sharif ordered regular army units and paramilitary Rangers to begin operations against Islamist militant elements in Punjab" and did so "without consulting either Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif or Shahbaz Sharif, the prime minister's brother and chief minister of Punjab province."

The military, not the civilian government, subsequently announced to the media that its Punjab operation was underway.

The government has since tried to present the decision to deploy the military in Punjab as jointly taken and unanimous. But this is clearly an attempt to save face and, more importantly, avoid provoking popular unease and anger over the military's power grab and the civilian government's acquiescence.

For its part, the military wanted it to be known that it was

acting independently of Sharif and the civilian authorities. "The army told the media to emphasize that the orders for the Punjab operation were given directly by General Sharif and not the prime minister," reports Ahmed Rashid in a piece published on the *New York Review of Books*' website.

The military had long been pressing for authorization to mount an offensive in the Punjab, but this was resisted by Nawaz and Shahbaz Sharif. This is because they feared the military, which is notorious for its human rights abuses, would provoke popular anger and because they were loathe to cede to the military significant authority in the province that is the power base of their party, the PML (N).

Prime Minister Sharif had been due to fly to Washington this week to attend the international Nuclear Security Summit, but canceled the trip, citing the need to respond to the Easter Sunday terror attack. At the conclusion of a high-level security meeting Monday, Prime Minister Sharif vowed to eliminate the "extremist mindset" and to "take this war to the doors of terrorist outfits."

In the first 48 hours after the attack, the military and allied security agencies reportedly arrested 5,200 people on "suspicion" of terrorism and supporting the Pakistan Taliban or TPP, under the country's draconian antiterrorism laws. However, the vast majority have been released without charge, exposing the arbitrary and fraudulent character of the military-led "crackdown." According to reports, as of Tuesday evening some 216 persons remained in custody.

Sunday's terrorist attack was the largest since the TPP assault on a military-supported school in Peshawar in December 2014 left 133 school children dead. Under pressure from the military, the Sharif government, with the support of the opposition parties, adopted a draconian "antiterrorism" National Action Plan (NAP) following the Peshawar attack. It removed the moratorium on capital punishment, expanded the state's right to detain persons without charge, and concentrated extraordinary powers in the hands of the military, including the power to try civilian "terrorist" suspects in secret military courts.

The military used the popular outcry over the Peshawar

massacre and the new powers granted it under the NAP to expand its ongoing operation in Karachi. Pakistan's largest city remains under effective military occupation. While the military boasts that it has cracked down on terrorist and criminal activity, there have been numerous complaints from civilians as well as the opposition parties of gross human rights violations by the Pakistan Rangers, including disappearances, extortion, torture, extrajudicial killings and the targeting of anyone opposing their authority, including local cadre of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and MQM.

According to Reuters, by the close of 2015, 95,000 people had been arrested under the NAP, of whom the military considered just 2,000 as "hard-core militant suspects."

Workers and leftists have been targeted for arrest and prosecution under the antiterrorism laws. In February, the government deployed the Rangers occupying Karachi to help the police suppress an anti-privatization strike against Pakistan International Airlines (PIA). With the government labeling the striking workers as "enemies of Pakistan," the security forces opened fire on strikers demonstrating at Jinnah International Airport, killing two and injuring a dozen more.

With the Pakistan elite under pressure from the International Monetary Fund to make good on its pledge to implement a massive privatization program and other socially incendiary economic "reforms," the military is increasingly asserting that it is better placed than the civilian government to uphold the class interests of the bourgeoisie.

The military has already reasserted its traditional control over foreign and national security policy. With it arrogating the power to conduct antiterrorism operations in Punjab, it is now deployed over large swathes of Pakistan, including: the country's commercial hub and metropolis Karachi; Baluchistan, where it is combating a separatist insurgency; and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which is home to the Pakistan Taliban.

In contrast to the venal Pakistani bourgeoisie and political establishment, among the working class there is no widespread support for the expansion of the military's power and presence. The military, with US backing, has directly ruled Pakistan for almost half of its existence, ruthlessly suppressing the struggles of the working class and upholding semi-feudal relations in the countryside. General Pervez Musharraf, whom George W. Bush lauded as one of the US's principal allies in the "war on terror," pressed forward with pro-investor reforms.

The parties of the Pakistani bourgeoisie have time and again acquiesced to the military. This is because when push comes to shove the ruling class recognizes that the military is the bulwark of Pakistan's grossly unequal capitalist social order, the guarantor of their wealth against a challenge from

below, and the pivot of the alliance with Washington and the Pentagon that similarly backstops their rule.

The PPP government that ruled Pakistan from 2008 to 2013 and that of Sharif which succeeded it has continued the basic policies of Musharraf, implementing IMF-dictated restructuring and supporting the US occupation of Afghanistan.

Each of these three governments supported the US war in Afghanistan by ordering the military to wage war in FATA, with its typical wanton disregard for human rights and life, and by conniving in US drone strikes that have terrorized the FATA's population and killed hundreds if not thousands of civilians.

The emergence of the TPP is the direct result of these criminal policies.

As for the "extremist mindset" Sharif is now vowing to eliminate, it is rooted in the "Islamization" campaign initiated by General Zia ul-Haq, the US-backed dictator who ruled the country from 1977 to 1988 and who was Sharif's political mentor.

Zia's regime promoted Islamist reaction as a means of intimidating and dividing the Pakistani working class, while playing a key role alongside the US and Saudi Arabia in organizing and arming the Islamic fundamentalist Mujahedeen to fight the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan. The TTP, like Al-Qaeda and Taliban, is the outcome of the predatory machinations of US imperialism and its Pakistani bourgeois satraps.



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