

Revolutionary eye on Pakistan: an interview

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The Labour Party Pakistan (LPP) is a revolutionary party, founded in 1997, with a membership of around 3000. The LPP has shown inspiring leadership in the struggles against women's oppression, dictatorship, religious fundamentalism and imperialism in Pakistan. Direct Action spoke to Farooq Tariq, LPP spokesperson, on the current situation in Pakistan.

Following the December 27 assassination of the Pakistan People's Party leader, Benazir Bhutto, the PPP swept to government in the February 18 general elections. What does the PPP's victory mean for the dictator, General Musharaf, and more generally for the military?

General Musharaf is still president of the country. The PPP speaks about impeaching him but has not taken any practical steps, simply demanding that Musharaf resign voluntarily. There is no doubt that he is the most hated president in Pakistan's history. On June 18, an American survey put him as the most hated president of any country in the world.

The PPP government does not threaten the economic interests of the military. The 2008/09 federal budget increased defence spending by 20 billion rupees [about A\$310 million], which suggests it is "business as usual". Some military officers have been recalled from civilian posts, but many more still remain. The PPP is the new face of the same economic agenda and priorities of the ousted pro-military government. In fact, the present PPP government has gone further in withdrawing state subsidies in the recent federal budget than even the previous Musharaf-Shoukat government was prepared to go. Price hikes are on the increase as before.

The elections were conducted under "emergency measures" or martial law imposed by Musharaf following the mass upsurge in the pro-democracy movement in March and November 2007. The LPP, as part of the broader All Parties Democratic Movement, decided to boycott the general elections. What were the achievements of the boycott campaign?

The campaign's main achievement was to exert pressure on the Musharaf regime for fair and free elections. The Musharaf regime could not rig the elections as it intended. There was a massive anti-dictatorship vote on the day. Although there was not an effective boycott in three of the four provinces, it achieved its main purpose by forcing the regime to accept the verdict of the people. Another outcome was that the boycott of 22 anti-Musharaf political parties provided an undivided anti-Musharaf vote for the two main opposition parties, the PPP and Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) [PMLN] .

What factors limited the impact of the boycott?

The main reason that people decided to vote was because they wanted to punish the Musharaf dictatorship. We did not correctly assess the prevailing mood of the masses. But we did encourage the people's mood by organising mass boycott rallies throughout Pakistan. We exposed Musharaf's intention to rig the elections and declared that we would instigate an immediate protest movement if that happened.

What impact has the PPP forming a government had on the advocates' movement in particular, and on the movement for the restoration of democracy more broadly?

The PPP government has not restored the judges to office, despite its pre- and post- election promises. Instead it has presented a so-called constitutional package to the parliament. The package includes restrictions on the judges who had not taken the oath under the Provisional Constitutional Order [PCO—the legislation used by Musharaf to sack the Supreme Court and install his own judges]. The PPP also wants to restore those judges who took the oath under the PCO. This means the judges who supported the emergency and justified all the dictatorial measures by Musharaf are to be treated equally with those who opposed dictatorial measures.

The PPP government are afraid of an independent judiciary because it could also make judgments against them. They want to preserve the status quo, in line with the policies of the Musharaf dictatorship and US imperialism. The deposed judges had raised concerns about the missing persons issue. These are mainly religious fundamentalists who have been abducted by intelligence agencies and probably handed over to the Americans. That is one reason that US imperialism has kept a criminal silence on the issue of the deposed judges.

The pro-Musharaf and anti-lawyers' movement policies have had a detrimental effect on the support for the PPP within the lawyers' movement. They have lost most of the bar councils, and PPP is now seen as a party from the other side. That is why the leader of the PPP, Asif Zardari, husband of Benazir Bhutto, is rapidly losing popularity.

The PPP leadership advised its members not to attend the 100,000-strong pro-democracy Long March from Karachi to Islamabad June 12-14. The People's Lawyers Forum, a PPP front among the advocates, announced a complete boycott of the event.

Once the demonstrators arrived in Islamabad, Aitzaz Ahsan, the president of the Supreme Court Bar Association, announced the end of the demonstration and that there would be no picket of Parliament. This sparked an immediate reaction by the young lawyers, who wanted to go all the way. Many wept that the main leadership of the lawyers' movement had moved so quickly from resistance to reconciliation.

A picket of thousands of lawyers would have spoiled the uneasy relationship of PPP and Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), the two main parties of the capitalists and feudals. The PMLN is in power in Punjab and came out of the central government when PPP did not restore the judges as promised.

The defeated regime planned to begin construction of the Kalabagh Dam on the Indus river in 2016. On May 27, the Sindh information minister, Shazia Marri, announced the cancellation of the project. What compelled the PPP to cancel construction? Are mega-projects still on the PPP's agenda?

There was a tremendous movement in Sindh against the building of this controversial dam prior to the PPP coming to power. People opposed the dam because it threatened to bring a near-drought situation for Sindh. The PPP's main base is in Sindh, so, in response to the mass movement, they cancelled the dam's construction. But there are other mega-projects that the PPP government is

going ahead with, such as construction of several military bases in Baluchistan, the Gwadar city mega-project and the ring roads around Lahore. So we should have no illusions that this government is opposed to all mega-projects that are playing havoc with people's lives.

Has the movement against fuel price rises been building for some time, or is this a new force in Pakistan? What political and class forces are involved in the protests?

There have been sporadic demonstrations against price hikes. But the main political parties have not taken any initiatives around this issue. The LPP demonstrations on June 6 were the only coordinated demonstrations across Pakistan. However, the LPP is a small political force.

Currently there is a mood of general apathy among the masses. They voted out the supporters of Musharaf at the general election with the false hope that PPP would take action against price hikes and unemployment. They have voted for PPP and are waiting to see the results of the party in power. The PPP leaders are saying, "We are in power for only three months, so do not expect miracles from us". Once General Musharaf is replaced, the mood of the masses will change dramatically on this question.

In June, the LPP announced the formation of its first branch in Baluchistan, the resource-rich province on the Iranian and Afghani border and site of ongoing guerrilla warfare. What preparatory work was done to establish the new branch? What is the LPP's involvement with the Baluchi national liberation struggle?

Some young people from the social movements joined the party and organised the first meeting on May 28-29 in Quetta. Those who participated were mainly from trade unions and social movements. Our weekly newspaper Mazdoor Jeddojuhd (Workers Struggle) played an important part in establishing us. We also organised a separate meeting of women, with 26 in attendance, to introduce the LPP to the province.

The comrades are young and the new to Marxist ideas but are very inspired by the LPP's role in the campaign against growing militarisation in Baluchistan. They are also happy with the LPP position on the national question. We stand for the right of nations to self-determination. We have always opposed the Pakistani military's attempts to crush the Baluchistan liberation struggle with force. The LPP demands more resources for Baluchistan, which is rich in natural resources but is the poorest province in regard to social development and industrial infrastructure.

It will take some time to develop the LPP in Baluchistan. We are based in only a few districts, mainly in Quetta. But it is a good beginning and we will grow quite rapidly.

This new branch is the most important development this year for our party. With the establishment of the LPP Baluchistan chapter, we now have a presence in all four provinces, the Northern Areas and Kashmir.

P.S.

* From Direct Action (Australia):

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