

The removal of Punjab (Pakistan) government: Defending despotic decisions is problematic

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The Pakistan People's Party leadership has a problem on its hands. There are not many ways to defend the governor of Punjab's 25 February 2009 ruling, which imposed a two-month suspension of the Punjab Assembly. While talking to Kamran Khan on channel Geo, Mian Raza Rabbani most respected and moderate leader of the PPP and chairman of the Senate—indicated it was necessary to stop the “prevailing state of anarchy.”

What was the immediate “prevailing” anarchy? A few hundred angry Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN) activists protested in cities throughout the country. They were opposing the Supreme Court's decision to bar the Nawaz brothers from participating in general elections. The three-member bench had upheld the decision of Lahore High Court. All these judges in these courts had taken the oath of the Provisional Constitutional Order (PCO) on 3 November 2007, when General Musharaf announced the state of emergency. Ever since, the lawyer's movement has demanded their removal.

On a small scale the situation was not unlike the upheaval that occurred following Benazir Bhutto's murder on 27 December 2007. Yet in this case no property was burnt; there was no looting of banks or burning of railways as was the case then. Clearly the situation could have been easily resolved by the police.

However the PPP leadership was just waiting for an opportunity to remove the PMLN Punjab government. The governor, a PPP member, had previously made threatening public statements to that effect.

The removal of Punjab government is a dictatorial measure imposed by the PPP government. It follows in General Musharaf's footsteps. It is a despotic decision difficult for a democratic person to justify. The fact is that the PPP leadership has implemented many bad decisions during their first year in power; this is another one. But it represents an end to their deceitful policy of “reconciliation.” This is a road to more repressive measures.

The decision to remove the Punjab government is the combined effort of the PCO judges and the PPP leadership and is a dress rehearsal for dealing with the proposed Long March of Lawyers, set for 12-16 March 2009. They are preparing to deal with the lawyers' movement by using an iron fist that will lead to a new round of arrests, detentions, and torture against those who challenge the remnants of the Musharaf dictatorship.

The current situation is a reminder of what existed following Musharaf's imposition of emergency. On 7 November, over 800 lawyers were arrested in Lahore alone. Then, in a bid to foil the challenge posed by the lawyers' movement, over 10,000 political activists were sent to jail. Even Benazir Bhutto was arrested.

The Charges Against Sharif

The Supreme Court judges have now declared Mian Nawaz Sharif ineligible for contesting elections based on a court sentence imposed under Musharaf's dictatorial rule. They also ruled that Mian Shahbaz Shari was likewise ineligible. Thus he loses his Punjab assembly seat and chief minister ship. His provincial government had to fall as well.

The judgment of the Supreme Court against Mian Nawaz Sharif is based on an allegation by General Musharaf, who accused him of hijacking the plane bringing Musharaf back from Sri Lanka on 12 October 1999. At the time Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif attempted to remove General Musharaf from his command; Musharaf opted to take over instead of accepting the order. It is now clear from all the evidence presented by several eye witnesses that Musharaf had already planned a military coup in coordination with other generals. But during the Musharaf period the courts sentenced Mian Nawaz Sharif for this alleged hijacking.

Then the PPP leadership covered up the Supreme Court unjustified decision by announcing it is "a court decision that we must respect." PPP hawkish leaders like Fozia Wahab and Qasim Zia presented these views on several news channels and in the newspapers. Several commentators sarcastically reminded them that the PPP had always opposed the Supreme Court's split decision which resulted in Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's hanging. During the Zia military dictatorship, on 4 April 1979, Benazir Bhutto's father was hanged on false murder charges.

What should have been the normal procedure if the chief minister of Punjab was disqualified? A session of the assembly should have been called to elect a new leader who enjoys the majority. But despite all their effort, the PPP leaders were unable to obtain a majority. They tried their best but they could not succeed; they feared that another PMLN member would become the leader of the house and eligible to form the next government. Thus, possibly another unfriendly PMLN government is in the making.

Lurching Toward Dictatorial Methods

The announcement of the Long March and Dharna (sit in) until the demand for the restoration of the independent judiciary is recognized has baffled, puzzled and confused the PPP government. Looking for ways to handle this situation, the PPP finally opted for dictatorial measures. It seems that the PPP government has removed General Musharaf only to adopt his dictatorial trends. A dictator is gone but not his policies. Thus the party has thrown away most of the glorious democratic traditions won through the heroic struggle of political activists, including the PPP, in fighting against military dictatorships.

Today the PPP under President Zardari cannot be viewed as party of liberal democrats. Rather it is party ruled by a feudal and capitalist elite supported by the most reactionary political trends. Yet like with General Musharaf, they have earned the hate of the masses.

The Labour Party Pakistan, which will be in the forefront of the lawyers' Long March as it has in the past, has condemned this dictatorial measure. Although the LPP does not have much in common with the capitalist politics of Main Nawaz Sharif's PMLN, the LPP sees its opposition as taking a principled democratic stand. Events erupt one after another so taking a principled position is the only way forward. The LPP had no illusions that any section of the ruling class can solve the basic problems facing the working class of Pakistan.

The only way forward is to strengthen an alternative working-class politics based on socialist ideas, not the politics of the rich. There has to be a very flexible but firm ideological socialist base to analyze the complex politics in Pakistan and other under developed countries. This is not a straight

road; there will be many twist and turns.

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