

# Pakistan: People challenge US-backed dictator

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On November 3, Pakistani military dictator General Pervez Musharraf initiated an intensified crackdown against all opposition to his increasingly unstable regime, with the declaration of a state of emergency. While the military's spin doctors have attempted to make a distinction between this state of emergency and martial law, it has seen thousands of people put into "preventative detention", mobile phones jammed, all non-government broadcasting stations taken off air and the abandonment of what pretence of rule of law still remained under Musharraf, who seized power in a coup in 1999.

However, the crackdown has been met by mass demonstrations and spontaneous strikes. Official explanations citing terrorism notwithstanding, Musharraf's move was widely seen as intending to prevent the supreme court from ruling on the constitutional legality of Musharraf's "re-election" for another five-year term as president while still heading the military.

The supreme court under Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry cannot be relied on by Musharraf to rule in favour of the regime. In May, Musharraf attempted to force Chaudhry's resignation after the latter made a number of rulings against the government, including frustrating plans to privatise Pakistan Steel Mills. However, mass protests by advocates (lawyers) became the catalyst for widespread popular protests against the dictatorship, and in July Musharraf backed down. Chaudhry has again been sacked and this time put under house arrest, along with other judges who refused to legitimise the state of emergency.

Hoping to prevent a repetition of the May protests, thousands of advocates and other activists have been placed into preventative detention, including Asma Jahangir, head of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, and Aitzaz Ahsan, president of the Supreme Court Bar Association. Others who have spoken out since the declaration of the state of emergency have also been arrested. However, this has not prevented anti-government protests, with lawyers again playing a prominent part.

While the US has condemned the state of emergency, US officials have stressed that this would not mean an end to the military aid that has propped up the regime. According to the November 5 *New York Times*, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said her government's priority was "to protect America and protect American citizens by continuing to fight against terrorists".

"We have to be very cognisant of the fact that some of the assistance that has been going to Pakistan is directly related to the counterterrorism mission", she said. Associated Press of Pakistan reported on November 5 that US Defence Secretary Robert Gates "noted the US is mindful not to do anything that would undermine on-going counterterrorism efforts".

The close relationship between the US and the Pakistani military was consolidated during the military dictatorship of General Zia ul-Haq in the 1980s, when Pakistan was the base for a US proxy war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The US proxies included forces that went on to become al Qaeda and the Taliban, the latter under the direct control of Pakistan's intelligence service when

they came to power in 1996.

The US has supported General Musharraf since his 1999 coup. His neoliberal economic policies have followed the prescriptions set by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank and seen the number of Pakistanis living under the official poverty line rise from 37% in 1999 to 50% in 2004. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Musharraf positioned himself as part of Bush's "war on terror" despite the links between the Pakistani military and the Taliban and al Qaeda. The US used Pakistan as a base for its invasion of Afghanistan, but allowed the regime time to extricate itself from the Taliban regime, in the process almost certainly allowing the al Qaeda leadership to escape to Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

This ambivalence toward the Islamic fundamentalists saw Musharraf turn a blind eye to years of criminal and terrorist activities associated with Islamabad's "Red Mosque", until a diplomatic incident was created in June with the kidnapping of Chinese workers. This prompted the army to launch a brutal assault on the mosque. While the fundamentalists portray themselves as opposing Musharraf's ties to imperialism, when the fundamentalist Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal won state elections in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan, they also implemented Washington-supported neoliberal economic policies.

While the real opposition to Musharraf has come from the trade unions, left-wing parties and civil society, in particular the advocates, fundamentalist opposition groups perpetrate indiscriminate acts of terrorism. Ironically, while the state of emergency is ostensibly aimed at the Taliban, the November 8 *Asia Times* reported that Taliban-aligned militias had taken advantage of the security forces being deployed against the political opposition in the cities and seized towns and villages in the NWFP, for the first time showing a presence outside the FATA.

On November 4, 100 activists were arrested attempting to have a meeting at the Human Rights Commission in Lahore. Among those arrested were Azra Shad and Khalid Malik, leaders of the left-wing Labour Party of Pakistan, which has played a central role in the advocates' movement. LPP chairperson Nisar Shah was arrested at a protest on November 7, but Farooq Tariq, the party's general secretary, who was detained three times in three months earlier this year, has so far managed to evade the authorities. On November 7 he narrowly avoided arrest, escaping by three-wheeled taxi when he realised the car he was travelling in had been fitted with a tracking device.

Former prime minister Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) also played a role in the advocates' movement in May, but entered into negotiations with Musharraf to drop corruption charges against her, so that she could return from exile. Bhutto returned on October 18, and entered into US-supported negotiations. However, following the arrest of hundreds of PPP members, Bhutto called on her supporters to resist. On November 9 she was placed under house arrest by heavily armed soldiers to prevent her from staging a planned rally in Rawalpindi. She was released the following day.

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