

Pakistan: Resistance to military rule continues

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On November 22, Pakistan's Supreme Court ruled that General Pervez Musharraf's re-election as president (by his hand-picked National Assembly in October) was legitimate, despite his role as head of the armed forces. This ruling is hardly surprising given that, after declaring "emergency rule" on November 3, Musharraf sacked the judges then in the Supreme Court, putting them under house arrest and stacking the court with his stooges. Musharraf has stated that once his puppet Supreme Court had legitimised his re-election, he would resign from the armed forces to become a "civilian" president.

He has also announced that there will be parliamentary elections on January 8, for which nominations for candidates will close on November 26. With political rallies banned, thousands of politicians, lawyers and activists in jail and non-government broadcast media silenced, these elections can only be farcical and a boycott by opposition parties seems likely.

Nawaz Sharif, the prime minister who was overthrown by Musharraf in a 1999 military coup, has thus far been prevented from returning from exile, which would prevent him from nominating even if his Pakistan Muslim League (N) decided to take part in elections. Benazir Bhutto, another former PM whose Pakistani Peoples Party (PPP) alternated in power with the PMLN during the 1988-99 period of parliamentary rule, returned from exile on October 18 as part of US-sponsored negotiations towards a power-sharing arrangement. However, her opposition to the November 3 emergency declaration, which has led to her twice being placed under house arrest, put an end to these talks. On November 16, she told a meeting of civil society and grassroots political activists that she would not hold any negotiations with the regime.

Following his November 21 release from jail, Imran Khan, former national cricket team captain and leader of the Tehreek-e-Insaaf (Movement for Justice), a smaller parliamentary party, called for a boycott of the sham elections.

Despite this, on November 21 US President George Bush, hailed Musharraf as "a loyal ally in fighting terrorists [who] has done more for democracy in Pakistan than any modern leader". The US has provided the Pakistani regime with aid worth US\$10 billion since 2001, the bulk of which has gone to the military.

Opposition to the regime continues on the streets. Protests from lawyers continue despite mass arrests. Lawyers were at the forefront of a movement that got Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry reinstated in July after he was sacked in March. Getting Chaudhry out of the Supreme Court was one of the motivations for Musharraf's emergency declaration. Chaudhry was arrested after the declaration. The regime claims he has been released, but he has not been seen and activists are sceptical.

A key role in organising the street protests has been played by the People's Democratic Movement (Awami Jamhoori Tehreek — AJT), an alliance of seven left-wing parties. Within days of the emergency declaration, more than 200 AJT activists were in custody, including most of the

leadership of the National Workers Party, the Labour Party of Pakistan (LPP) and the People's Movement (Awami Tehreek — AT). Several of these activists are charged with treason, which carries a death sentence.

LPP general secretary Farooq Tariq and AT leader Rasul Buksh Paleejo have continued to organise despite being forced underground and the subject of police hunts. In Sind province, the AT have adopted a civil disobedience tactic of “filling the jails”, with more than 300 of their members imprisoned by November 21. The left parties have supported moves by the mainstream parties for a united opposition to the military and boycott of the elections.

On November 19, women from the LPP held a 30-minute protest that stopped traffic in Lahore. “We are working-class women fighting a military regime and we have not much to lose but our chains!”, one of the women told assembled media. On November 20 there were nationwide protests by journalists. In Faisalabad and Karachi, these received a violent response from police; in Karachi, 180 journalists were brutally beaten before being taken off to jail.

A surprising development has been protests by thousands of students on the Punjab University campus at Lahore against the control of the campus by the IJT, the student wing of the fundamentalist party Jamaat-i-Islami. The IJT, which is involved in criminal and terrorist activity, has exercised a reign of terror over the campus since 1977, using beatings and murder to exclude other political forces and enforce segregation between the sexes and a ban on music. The protests began after Imran Khan was kidnapped by IJT thugs and handed over to police when he tried to address a rally at the campus on November 15.

This collaboration between the IJT and the police demonstrates the close relationship between the fundamentalists and the military — Musharraf's status as Bush's “indispensable ally against terrorism” notwithstanding. The IJT took control of the campus as part of the destabilisation and overthrow of the government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (Benazir's father) by the military under Zia ul-Haq. Zia consolidated his rule by having Bhutto hanged. During the 1980s, the Pakistani military was the main conduit for US support for local and foreign anti-communist forces in Afghanistan. Both the Taliban and the warlords currently in power in Afghanistan originated in the Afghan component of this force, while the overseas fighters went on to become al Qaeda.

P.S.

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