

Pakistan: Musharraf struggles to hold on

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Called by military dictator General Pervez Musharraf after the imposition of emergency rule — which saw the sacking of the judiciary, imprisonment of 10,000 opposition activists, censorship and closure of media outlets and the violent suppression of protests — and set against the backdrop of increasing terrorist attacks by religious fundamentalists, Pakistan's upcoming general elections were already set to be farcical.

Then the brutal assassination on December 27 of the most popular opposition candidate, Benazir Bhutto, destroyed any semblance of fairness that remained.

However, while left-wing parties united in the People's Democratic Movement (AJT) and some mainstream parties are boycotting the elections and demanding that Musharraf resign, both Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the other main opposition party, the Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N), are participating in the poll, which has been postponed from January 8 until February 18 in response to Bhutto's murder.

Bhutto was shot as she left an election rally in Rawalpindi, by a gunman who immediately afterwards blew himself up. Her killing provoked a general strike that shut the country down for five days and a mass outpouring of anger against Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 coup, and the military-backed political party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Q (PML-Q).

According to a December 29 report by Farooq Tariq, a national spokesperson for the AJT-affiliated Labour Party of Pakistan (LPP), all PML-Q election posters, banners, flags and billboards were removed by angry crowds within hours of the murder.

While corporate media reports have created the impression of random destruction of property, Tariq explained that the targets of the crowds' anger corresponded to unpopular aspects of Musharraf's neoliberal policy. For example, the burning of banks and trashing of ATMs reflected anger at the re-introduction of banking fees that had been abolished in the 1960s.

Buses were targeted because the previously public bus system had been privatised by Musharraf, causing fare hikes, with several of the bus companies that benefited owned by PML-Q cabinet ministers. For similar reasons, over 3 billion rupees worth of damage was inflicted on the partially privatised rail system.

While most Pakistanis believe that the Musharraf regime was behind Bhutto's slaying, the government has blamed Al Qaeda and Taliban-aligned religious fundamentalists. The reality is that, the "war on terror" notwithstanding, there are close links between the military, the political establishment, the fundamentalist terrorists and the US.

The power of religious extremists in Pakistan began with their role in the 1977 US-backed military coup against the PPP government led by Benazir Bhutto's father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. This coup brought to power General Zia ul-Haq, who had Bhutto hanged in 1979.

The power of Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan was strengthened by events in neighbouring Afghanistan. Following an April 1978 anti-imperialist revolution, the CIA used religious extremism to

create an armed counter-revolution, which led to the December 1979 Soviet intervention.

Over the next decade the US, in collaboration with the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), poured billions of dollars of military aid into the Afghan Mujihadeen — which later spawned both the Taliban and the warlords currently in power in Kabul. An international terrorist force that became Al Qaeda was also created.

After General Zia was assassinated in 1988, for the next 11 years the corrupt, nominally democratic governments of Benazir Bhutto's PPP (1988-90 and 1993-96) and the PML-N of Nawaz Sharif (1990-93 and 1996-99) held power in Pakistan.

The ISI remained involved in Afghanistan and was behind the 1996 rise to power of the Taliban, with the approval of Benazir Bhutto's government.

Washington's support for Musharraf's dictatorship was based primarily on his being more effective at implementing pro-corporate neoliberal policies than his predecessors. Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, US support for Musharraf has been portrayed as part of the "war on terror".

While Pakistan was used as a platform for the invasion of Afghanistan, the US allowed Musharraf time to withdraw his forces. In the process most of the Taliban and Al Qaeda leadership were able to escape to the remote Pakistani border region of Waziristan — where Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden is believed to reside.

However, as the US got bogged down in Afghanistan, it increasingly put pressure on Musharraf to take action against the Islamic forces in Waziristan, which has led to clashes in which civilians have been the main casualties. There are now divisions within the fundamentalists between those who support and oppose Musharraf, and possibly also divisions within the military and ISI over attitudes towards the religious extremists.

For years the military turned a blind eye to fundamentalists using the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad as a base for criminal and terrorist activity. However, in July 2007, after the kidnapping of Chinese workers created embarrassment for Musharraf internationally, the military stormed the mosque, killing a number of civilians. While Islamist rhetoric is anti-US and increasingly anti-Musharraf, their targets are generally civilians or opposition politicians.

Equally convoluted is the relationship between Musharraf and the PPP. After Musharraf's 1999 coup, both Bhutto and PML-N leader Sharif were exiled, with criminal charges related to corruption (almost certainly with some basis in fact) used to prevent them returning.

In May 2007 Musharraf sacked the Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, who had refused to toe the regime's line. However, courageous demonstrations by the country's legal fraternity forced the dictatorship to reinstate him in July.

Concerned by its ally's loss of legitimacy, the US attempted to create some form of power sharing arrangement between Bhutto and Musharraf that would give the military regime a civilian face. On October 16, after the corruption charges were dropped, Bhutto returned to Pakistan and began negotiations with Musharraf.

Her popularity was demonstrated by the large crowds that turned out to welcome her. A suicide bombing at a rally to welcome Bhutto's return killed 135 of her supporters. However, to legitimise the moves to give his regime a "civilian" face, Musharraf needed a Supreme Court more pliable than that headed by Chaudhry. The November 3 imposition of emergency rule (martial law) was largely to

enable the sacking of Chaudhry and other judges and replace them with judges under Musharraf's control.

The participation of rank-and-file PPP members in the mass movement against emergency rule led to Bhutto breaking off talks with the regime and joining other parties in calling for a boycott of the planned elections. However, following the December 15 lifting of the emergency, and Musharraf's subsequent retirement from the military, Bhutto changed tack again and agreed to participate in the elections.

This was despite the stacking of the courts remaining, along with most of the anti-democratic decrees made under emergency rule.

Following Bhutto's murder, the PPP reiterated its intention of running in the elections, hoping to capitalise on public sympathy. This was criticised by Tariq, who in a January 17 report argued that with the mass protests and general strike that followed Bhutto's slaying, if the PPP and PML-N had stood firm against the regime, Musharraf would have been swept from power.

Furthermore, the regime has used the threat of further terrorist attacks to ban parties from holding public rallies, essential for opposition parties to reach voters given the government's tight control of the media. Moreover, steep price hikes announced on January 17 have deepened the impoverishment of Pakistani workers and peasants, which, while increasing hatred of government gives an electoral advantage to parties such as the PML-Q who buy votes.

On December 30, the PPP announced that its new chairperson would be Bhutto's 19-year-old son Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, an apolitical Oxford University student who has lived most of his life in Britain. For the time being, the de-facto leader will be his father Asif Zardari, who during his wife's terms as PM was known as "Mr Ten Per Cent" because of the financial benefits he extracted from his proximity to power.

P.S.

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