

In lead-up to Washington visit

Pakistan prime minister imposes military crackdown

By K. Ratnayake
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US President Bill Clinton told visiting Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to "restrict nuclear and missile programs to enable him to further ease sanctions," imposed on Pakistan and India after nuclear tests in May. Sharif met Clinton in Washington on December 3 to "strengthen ties" with the United States and to appeal for a lifting of sanctions which have aggravated the crisis within the South Asian country.

On the eve of the meeting with Sharif, Clinton waived some of the sanctions imposed on both Pakistan and India. This move will permit US commercial banks and the Export-Import Bank to resume lending to Pakistan and is expected to pave the way for the IMF to release a \$1.5 billion loan which was suspended as a result of the sanctions. The United States is keen to keep the Pakistan market open, as well as to cement its political domination of the country. Wheat exports to Pakistan were resumed earlier after big wheat producers lobbied the White House and US Congress.

Sharif visited Washington two weeks after imposing a military crackdown, including setting up military courts in Karachi on November 20. Karachi is the commercial centre of the country and the capital of Sind Province. The government has transferred so-called terrorist-related cases from civil to military courts. Hundreds of people arrested by the police and the army will be tried in these courts.

Announcing the establishment of the military courts Sharif said: "Through the military courts speedy justice will be provided and decisions will come not in months or weeks, but in days."

Karachi has become a cauldron of violent religious and political clashes abetted by Sharif's government. Repression has been directed against the Mohajir

community and Muttahid Quami Movement (MQM), a Mohajir communal party. "Mohajirs" is a term for refugees. They are Urdu-speaking settlers descended from refugees who fled from the Hindu-dominated regions of India during the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. The MQM has also resorted to terrorist tactics as a bargaining chip in dealings with the majority Sunni Muslim bourgeoisie.

Since January of this year about 1,000 have been killed in religious and political fighting. During the government of Benazir Bhutto in 1995-96 2,500 were killed, and in 1997 about 400 people died from such clashes. Karachi was given the title "City of Death".

The MQM was initially in alliance with Sharif's government. It broke this alliance after Sharif introduced a bill to make Islamic law the "supreme law" of the country. After Sharif made some changes in the bill, the MQM again supported the government. But when the provincial governor of Sind was killed Sharif blamed the MQM, which then again broke relations with the government. Sharif arbitrarily suspended the Sind provincial government on October 30 and sealed the provincial parliament on November 16, mobilising armoured divisions of the police.

Sharif is combining military repression and appeals to religious fundamentalism in his drive towards dictatorial rule. Speaking at a remote village in the North West Frontier Province on November 17 he said Pakistan needed a system which could deliver "quick justice, like in Afghanistan under Taleban rule". Citing examples from the brutal repressive measures of the Taleban regime, Sharif said that in Afghanistan "justice is administered within 24 hours".

After pushing the bill making Islamic law supreme

through the lower house of parliament, Sharif found it blocked in the upper house, where he lacks a majority. He has now appealed to ulemas (Muslim priests) and other religious extremists to force deputies in the Senate to vote for the bill.

The dictatorial measures of the Sharif government show the depth of the crisis of the Pakistan bourgeoisie. When the sanctions were imposed on Pakistan by the US, the IMF and the World Bank, foreign investors began pulling out of the stock market. The Pakistan rupee is devaluing fast and poverty is rampant. According to a 1996 International Labour Organisation survey, there are 3.6 million child workers between the ages of 5 and 14 in the country.

The balance of payments deficit for this year will approach US\$5 billion, according to IMF figures. The IMF suspended a \$1.5 billion loan and has not yet resumed talks with the Pakistan government to arrange a new loan. Even after the partial lifting of sanctions by Washington, the IMF postponed the talks on a new loan package until January.

The bourgeoisie deliberately provokes religious and ethnic violence and launches terror campaigns to divert the workers and peasants and to systematically suppress them. The main concern of the ruling class is that the extreme poverty and longstanding discontent among the masses, aggravated by the world capitalist crisis, will explode into social upheavals.

The Pakistan ruling class has repeatedly resorted to military rule. In 1958--11 years after the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan by British imperialism--the military dictatorship of General Ayub Khan came to power.

Three years of mass struggles from 1968 onwards, followed by the breakaway of Bangladesh and war with India, brought down this dictatorship, and power shifted to the civilian rule of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Within 10 years, however, the ruling class again shifted to the military rule of Zia Ul-Haq.

This came to an end in August 1988, when Zia was killed in a plane crash. It is widely believed that the CIA was involved in the conspiracy to end Zia's rule, just as mass opposition was growing in the country. Sections of the bourgeoisie decided, with the approval of the US, to bring Benazir Bhutto to power to defuse the crisis.

During the past few years parties and leaders have been

topped repeatedly before completing their terms in office, and the bourgeoisie is once more turning towards dictatorial methods. This instability is the reflection of the political crisis and shows the inviability of the state structures created by the imperialists in 1947 with the participation of the Indian bourgeoisie, both in the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League.

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