

More in regret than anger

Bhutto calls for Pakistan's US-backed military strongman to resign

By Keith Jones
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Pakistan People's Party life chairperson Benazir Bhutto has been compelled to ratchet up her condemnations of Pakistan's US-supported military strongman, General Pervez Musharraf, and his martial-law regime.

On Monday, Bhutto announced that she was breaking off power-sharing negotiations with Musharraf—negotiations initiated months ago at the urging of the Bush administration and which it hoped would provide the military-controlled government with a democratic façade.

“We cannot work with anyone who has suspended the Constitution, imposed emergency rule and oppressed the judiciary,” said Bhutto. “We are saying no to any more talks.”

Then on Tuesday, after the government had, for the second time in five days, mounted a massive mobilization of security forces to prevent her leading a protest against martial law, Bhutto demanded that Musharraf resign as both president and the chief of Pakistan's armed services.

“I am calling for General Musharraf to step down, to quit, to leave,” Bhutto told a group of reporters in a telephone interview from the Lahore residence in which she has been ordered detained for the next seven days.

Hitherto, Bhutto had only demanded that Musharraf make good on his longstanding pledge to step down as armed forces chief, lift the state of emergency, and ensure that elections for the national and provincial legislatures are held by January 15.

Bhutto made clear that she lamented having to take this step. Of Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 coup, rewrote the constitution to give the military the

dominant voice in shaping government policy, has repeatedly rigged elections, and used brutal force to repress dissent, culminating in the November 3 imposition of de facto martial law, Bhutto said, “I feel he's done too little, too late. He keeps trying to bide time.... Pakistan needs stability. I could not serve as prime minister with General Musharraf as president. I wish I could.”

Bhutto knows that the Bush administration wants her to work with its longtime ally Musharraf and she and the Pakistani Peoples Party (PPP) leadership well recognize that the military is critical to the defence of their own privileges—to the maintenance of Pakistan's grossly inequitable social order and its integrity as a nation state.

For months she has been counseling against the launching of a popular movement against the military regime, warning that it could quickly spin out of control of the traditional political elite.

Since Musharraf declared de facto martial so as to preempt a Supreme Court ruling striking down his sham reelection as president, Bhutto has sought to calibrate her actions in line with the Bush administration's appeals for the opposition to show “restraint” and for all “moderate forces” to work with the general-president for “democracy.”

In so doing, she has provoked increasing public opprobrium, as well as mounting criticism from within the PPP, for consorting with a brutal dictatorial regime and one that has increasingly lashed out at PPP supporters.

Late Monday evening and Tuesday, thousands of security forces, many of them armed with AK-47s, were mobilized to prevent the PPP from mounting a

multi-day protest caravan from Lahore to the capital, Islamabad. The house in Lahore where Bhutto was staying was surrounded with barbed wire, vehicles and 900 police. In an act of intimidation that was passed off as a measure to prevent a terrorist attack on Bhutto, sharpshooters were stationed on adjacent buildings.

There is no way of accurately determining the number of opposition politicians, lawyers, human rights activists, and trade unionists who have been taken into preventive detention or arrested for defying the martial law regime. The *New York Times* reported Monday, before a new wave of arrests directed at PPP supporters planning to join Tuesday's caravan, that Western diplomats had put the total at 2,500. The judiciary has been purged. Most private television stations remain off the air because they are refusing to abide by a draconian censorship code that threatens broadcasters who run afoul of the government with imprisonment.

Last weekend the government made civilians subject to trial by military courts on charges ranging from treason to making "statements conducive to public mischief."

Following Bhutto's call for Musharraf to resign, Western diplomats told the London *Financial Times* that they do not think that the PPP leader and two-time former prime minister has truly closed the door to a deal with Musharraf and the military. "My sense is that a complete breakdown is still not going to happen, given the US influence with both parties," said one unnamed diplomat. The *Washington Post*, meanwhile, quoted another anonymous Western diplomat as saying, "Bhutto is a master of public relations. She's not going to overthrow her own apple cart."

But Musharraf and the military regime have responded to Bhutto's maneuvers with increasing anger and fear. In interviews Tuesday with NBC and the *New York Times*, Musharraf ranted against human rights activists and the press, while accusing Bhutto of adopting a "confrontationist" stance since she returned to Pakistan from eight years of exile on October 18.

Concerned that events in Pakistan could lead to what from Washington's perspective is the nightmare scenario of a head-on-clash between the Pakistani people and the military, the Bush administration has announced that Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte will visit Islamabad later this week.

The Bush administration is desperate to sustain the military regime in Islamabad, because it is playing a pivotal role in both the US occupation of Afghanistan—half of the oil used by US forces in Afghanistan and other crucial supplies are transported through Pakistan—and in the Pentagon's preparations for a military showdown with Iran.

According to the State Department, the message Negroponte is to deliver to Musharraf is that he must lift martial law before the elections in early January. Apparently, even the Bush administration would find it difficult to claim before the world that an election in which people could be jailed for criticizing the government, the press is censored, and all meetings and rallies are banned is "free and fair."

In an article posted Tuesday evening, the *New York Times* cited unnamed Bush administration officials as saying they are "increasingly frustrated with both General Musharraf and Ms. Bhutto" and that they are "quietly trying to take the temperature of Pakistan's army for signs that General Musharraf's top officers" are "starting to turn cool toward him."

"It's not a question of trying to prompt anything," one senior official said. "We're just trying to make sure we're keeping tabs of all the concerned parties."

In other words, the Bush administration is exploring the possibility of switching generals, of dispensing with Musharraf in the interests of forestalling a popular upheaval that could threaten the military controlled government.

But events in Pakistan, let alone Iraq, have already demonstrated that US imperialism's reach increasingly exceeds its grasp.

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