

Pakistan staggers toward elections amid civil war and impending economic collapse

By Sampath Perera and Keith Jones
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Pakistan's interim Prime Minister, Mir Hazar Khan Khoso, vowed in a nationally-televised address Friday that the caretaker government he heads will not accept any extension in its mandate and that the national and provincial elections scheduled for May 11 will proceed as planned.

Khoso's address came in response to mounting political violence and rumours long-circulating in Pakistani political circles that the elections could be postponed and the interim government used as the mechanism to impose politically-explosive IMF austerity measures. Last week the caretaker government negotiated the framework for a \$5 billion emergency IMF loan.

Due to threats from the Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan, an Islamic fundamentalist group allied with the Taliban in resisting the U.S. occupation of Afghanistan, the three parties that comprised Pakistan's coalition government from 2008 till March of this year—the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the Pashtun nationalist Awami National Party (ANP), and the ethnic-based Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM)—have held few election rallies. This is especially true of the PPP, the dominant party in the outgoing coalition government.

On Friday it was reported that the PPP's dynastic party chief, the 24 year-old Bilawal Bhutto, has been whisked out of the country and will not return until after the elections because of fears for his life. With his father, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, banned from participating in the elections due to his constitutional role, Bhutto had been touted as the PPP's star campaigner.

While the Pakistani and international media frequently term the PPP and its allies "left" and "secular" parties, the reality is that they are corrupt instruments of the venal Pakistani bourgeoisie, which have continued and intensified the reactionary policies of their predecessor—the dictatorship of General Pervez Musharraf. Under their rule, Pakistan has widened its participation in the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan, giving tacit support to US drone strikes that have killed thousands, and launching military operations at the US's behest that have plunged large swathes of northwest Pakistan into civil war and displaced millions. The PPP-led coalition government also pressed forward with IMF-dictated subsidy and social spending cuts, pushing still wider sections of the

population into poverty and outright hunger.

Citing the widespread election violence, the caretaker government announced Thursday that it has requested the military to oversee security for the election. This announcement came just a day after the country's chief election commissioner had said that unless there was an improvement in the "law and order situation," "it would be difficult to administer a free and fair election."

Military forces quickly deployed following the government's announcement, indicating that their intervention had been long-planned. According to Major General Asim Saleem Bajva, the army is mobilizing 70,000 troops for "election security" with the entire operation coordinated from army headquarters. He said that the troop deployment in Balochistan would be completed by Thursday evening, that in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa it would be an on-going process, and that soldiers would deploy to the Punjab and to Sindh, including Karachi, yesterday. Additional forces, said Bajva, would be kept on standby and army helicopters will be used on surveillance missions across the country.

The army intervention is in addition to the planned election-day mobilization of 600,000 police, paramilitary Rangers, and other security personnel.

In the past three weeks, at least 74 people have been killed and more than 350 injured, with the violence centered in Karachi, Balochistan and the predominantly-Pashtun province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In Karachi, which with a population of 18 million is Pakistan's economic center, the major political parties are aligned with criminal gangs and have a long history of violent turf wars and targeted ethnic-killings. In mineral-rich Balochistan, ethno-separatist insurgents have vowed to prevent the elections and carried out a series of attacks on party offices, politicians and election and government officials. However, the majority of the attacks have been carried out by the Tehrik e Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

A TTP spokesman told *Dawn*, a major Pakistani daily and website, that it "had decided to target those secular political parties which were part of the previous coalition government and involved in the [military] operations in Swat Valley, FATA [Federally Administered Tribal Areas] and other areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa."

In response to a question from the *Dawn*, the TTP spokesman said that the group was “neither ... against nor in favour” of the PML (N) [the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)] or the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). The PPP’s main election rivals, the PML (N) and especially the PTI, have on occasion criticized the US drone strikes. But both have strong ties to the military and, like the entire Pakistani ruling class, view the Pakistani-US alliance as central to the country’s geo-political strategy and a vital defence against the threat of social revolution from below.

U.S. State Department spokesman Patrik Ventrell speaking to the media on Wednesday hypocritically denounced the TTP as an opponent of democracy, while claiming that Washington supports a “timely, transparent and, free and fair election.”

U.S. imperialism has in fact been the principal bulwark of reaction in Pakistan, supporting a succession of right-wing military dictatorships and using Pakistan as a satrap in its predatory wars and geo-political power plays. Washington was a staunch supporter of General Zai-ul Haq, who oversaw the country’s “Islamisation,” using his military regime as the pivot of its stratagem of arming the Afghan Mujahedeen to overthrow the Soviet-backed government in Kabul.

Since 2001, it has transformed Pakistan into the launching pad for its drive to transform Afghanistan into its strategic beachhead in energy-rich Central Asia, lavishing support on the dictator Musharraf until his regime unravelled and asserting an unbridled right to rain death on Pakistani villagers with its drone strikes.

The US has also been in the forefront of pressing Islamabad to adopt pro-market “reforms” that will reduce the little state support that exists for workers and toilers, while making it easier for international capital to use Pakistan as a cheap-labor producer and to access its natural resources.

With the US’s approval, the IMF refused to release the final tranches of Pakistan’s last loan, because the political elite, fearing a popular explosion, balked at implementing IMF demands for price-subsidy and social-spending cuts and for higher taxes, including regressive consumption taxes.

Now with Pakistan’s weak economy being battered by the world recession and chronic power shortages, Islamabad can no longer postpone accessing IMF funds. For weeks the Pakistani press has been full of warnings of an impending balance of payments crisis and run on the rupee. Pakistan’s foreign reserves have fallen to just US \$6.6 billion and, when funds being used to prop up the rupee are subtracted, stand at \$4.3 billion, equal to less than a month’s imports.

With the backing of big business, the interim government sent a team to the annual meetings of the IMF and World Bank held in Washington late last month that, in flagrant violation of its limited mandate as a caretaker regime, conducted negotiations with the IMF on an emergency loan.

According to the *Daily Times*, the team established the framework for an IMF loan, reaching “a three point

understanding.” Shahid Amjad, financial advisor to the caretaker prime minister told reporters, “It will be the prerogative of the new elected government” to finalize and access this loan.

Whatever the composition of Pakistan’s next government, it will impose the IMF measures on Pakistan’s workers and toilers. The PPP repeatedly accepted the IMF’s austerity demands but despite its repeated pleas could not convince its allies and the opposition parties to drop their two-faced opposition. In its election platform the PML (N) has baldly called for sweeping pro-investor reforms. The TTP is no less a party of the ruling elite, enjoying the support of a section of the military and prominent big businessmen like Asad Umar, the former CEO of Engro.

With the country so manifestly in crisis, there is much discussion in the press as to whether the military will intervene. In response to the election violence, Pakistani military chief Ashfaq Parvez Kayani has issued pro forma statements of the military’s support for democracy.

Despite the window-dressing of civilian government, the military retains effective control over the country’s foreign and national-security polices and the pivotal power-broker in any crisis.

The Obama administration and the US military fully support the Pakistani military’s preponderant role, viewing it as the anchor of the US-Pakistani strategic alliance. Last week when US Secretary of State John Kerry convened a meeting in Brussels to discuss the US’s plans for protecting its strategic interests in Afghanistan post-2014, his interlocutors were Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Pakistani’s military chief, Kayani.

The May 11 national and provincial elections are meant to provide a democratic fig-leaf for IMF austerity, continuing war in Afghanistan, and a military-strategic alliance with Washington that has proven ruinous for the Pakistani people.

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