

Pakistan's Democracy Movement Flexes its Muscles

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In an apparent, but by no means guaranteed, victory for pro-democracy forces, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari was forced to reinstate Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry and other judges dismissed by the Musharraf regime in 2007.

Chaudhry, a lightning-rod for opposition to military rule, resumed his duties March 22, when supporters "of the reinstated jurist raised the Pakistani flag at his residence, in keeping with a vow made by former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto before her assassination 15 months ago," the *Los Angeles Times* [reports](#).

Last week's announcement by Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani was a major climb down for the Zardari administration and followed an escalating revolt against his authoritarian rule. The move however, came after intense behind-the-scenes pressure by the United States and the Army's General Headquarters in Rawalpindi.

More than a thousand activists, including lawyers, party workers, left-wing and labor organizers had been arrested when the crisis accelerated February 25. The Pakistan High Court barred former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, the leader of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and his younger brother Shabaz, toppled as the Governor of Punjab, from holding elected office, sparking outrage among citizens who believed Zardari had engineered the move.

The government has ordered that arrested protesters be released from jail and house arrest. Ali Ahmad Kurd, a leader of the protesting lawyers, [told](#) *The New York Times*, "No country can progress without an independent judiciary and the government-by restoring the chief justice and other judges-has also realized it, and we think it is a big success."

Among the lawyers' most prominent demands, now realized, was the restoration of Chief Justice Choudhry. Toppled by the Musharraf dictatorship, Choudhry had championed the rights of the dispossessed and disappeared, some of whom were "rendered" to the Guantánamo Bay detention facility and CIA "black sites."

In addition to hauling intelligence officers into court and demanding that illegally detained citizens receive a proper hearing, the Chief Justice enraged the country's venal ruling class by blocking the privatization of the Pakistan Steel Mills Corporation.

Despite a pledge to restore the Court when he assumed the presidency in September 2008, Zardari reneged on that pledge, sparking the political crisis that ended in a route for the President.

Fearful that Choudhry would overturn the shameful National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO), an unprincipled agreement brokered by the criminal Bush regime, President-General

Musharraf and the late Benazir Bhutto, Zardari imposed executive rule in Punjab. As part of the U.S.-brokered deal, Musharraf had agreed to drop corruption charges against the Bhutto clan.

The die for Zardari was cast March 15, after several hours of pitched battles in Lahore between activists and police. After cruelly beating demonstrators and hurling tear gas grenades at peaceful protesters, police cordons melted away leaving the city center to triumphant pro-democracy activists.

The New York Times [reported](#) March 16, that Saturday's Lahore clash transformed into a giant antigovernment protest when "phalanxes of riot policemen here in Lahore melted away rather than continue to confront protesters who had rallied around the opposition leader, Nawaz Sharif, when he defied a house arrest order early Sunday."

Additionally, "party workers armed with cranes" began dismantling roadblocks by police "at junctions along the route to the capital." One of the senior officials of the Lahore government, chief magistrate Sajjad Bhutta, "told reporters he refused to carry out what he called the illegal acts of the police crackdown. He appeared among the crowds on the mall, surrounded by cheers and waving flags," according to the *Times*.

Top police officials in Lahore, Punjab and even nationally, refused to carry out Zardari's orders and resigned. The *World Socialist Web Site* [reported](#), these "included the Deputy Inspector General and the Superintendent of Police for Lahore. In quitting his post as Pakistan's Deputy Attorney-General, Abdul Hai Gilani accused police of torturing protesters."

With the situation spinning out of control, Aitzaz Ahsan, a former PPP official and leader of the lawyers' movement declared, "The writ of the government has ended. Nobody can stop us from reaching Islamabad."

Meanwhile behind the scenes, frantic phone calls from U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, President Obama's special envoy Richard Holbrooke and U.S. Ambassador Anne Patterson demanded Zardari bring the crisis to a halt.

Dawn [reported](#) that "US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told President Zardari and opposition leader and PML-N chief Nawaz Sharif over the weekend US aid could be at risk unless they defused a crisis over a top judge, US officials said on Monday."

U.S. efforts, according to the Karachi-based newspaper, were "coordinated with British Foreign Secretary David Miliband" and "had exerted strong pressure for a deal." In the aftermath of the crisis, Clinton told journalists that the decision to reinstate Chaudhry "was a first step for much-needed reconciliation and political compromise in Pakistan"—on U.S. terms.

According to [The New York Times](#) Holbrooke said the United States applauded "the statesmanlike act by President Zardari and hope that it will help defuse a dangerous confrontation so that Pakistan, with the help of its many friends, can address the nation's pressing and urgent needs."

Pivotal to resolving the situation, the Pentagon had repeated consultations with Army Chief of Staff General Asfaq Pervez Kayani. While the *Times* claimed that "General Kayani has said he wants to keep the army out of politics," after prodding by Washington Kayani reportedly laid down the law to Zardari and Gilani after meetings on Sunday.

Dawn [revealed](#) Wednesday that “Pakistan’s army chief played a crucial role behind the scenes to resolve the long march crisis, illustrating how a military with a record of seizing power could use its influence in the future, analysts said.”

After nearly a decade of incompetent and corrupt rule under Musharraf, the Army now prefers to control political events from the shadows.

Security analyst Ikram Sehgal said the army was reverting to the sort of role it played through most of the 1990s, when it declined to take power but exerted its influence discreetly during periods of political turmoil.

“The army wants desperately to keep out of the situation. They realise they do not have the capabilities to run a government,” Sehgal said.

“One will definitely see the army playing a role behind the scenes ... If they stepped back in it would probably be on a Bangladesh model: set up a technocratic government and run the people who run the government,” he said. (“Pakistan military helped broker end to long march,” Dawn, March 18, 2009)

This is a “model” the Global Godfather in Washington will likely exploit, especially as the Obama administration seeks to expand U.S. military operations—including increased drone attacks and commando assaults by CIA paramilitary officers and U.S. Special Forces—into Baluchistan, [according](#) to *The New York Times*.

America’s Role

It is no secret that the United States, first under Bush, and now under Obama, view Pakistan as the “central front” in imperialism’s oxymoronic “war on terror.” For decades, the U.S. has viewed Pakistan as little more than a “strategic asset” to advance America’s geopolitical goals in Central- and South Asia.

While “terrorism” and “stability operations” in Afghanistan are the pretexts for increased military intervention across the region, resource extraction and pipeline politics are the unspoken reasons for military escalation. Amid a backdrop of global capitalist economic meltdown and crisis, imperialism is playing a desperate hand to gain control over the region’s vast oil and gas reserves from their geopolitical rivals, Russia and China.

Despite the crisis inside the country, CIA drones killed 24 people in tribal area of Kurram March 13, in a demonstration that come what may, the United States will do as it pleases. 50 other people were wounded in the attack, said to have targeted a “training center” run by the Taliban. *The World Socialist Web Site* [reports](#),

On Thursday, US Central Command chief Gen. David Petraeus and Richard Holbrooke, the US special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, delivered a closed-door briefing to leading members of the US Senate in what was apparently part of the preparation for the public presentation of the new strategy for waging the war that was first launched by the administration of George W. Bush nearly seven and a half years ago.

In an appearance on PBS Television’s “Charlie Rose Show,” Adm. Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that the strategy review would focus on “the safe haven in Pakistan, making sure that Afghanistan doesn’t provide a capability in the long run

or an environment in which Al Qaeda could return or the Taliban could return.” (Bill Van Auken, “U.S. missiles kill 24 in Pakistan,” *World Socialist Web Site*, March 14, 2009)

While the Zardari government has mendaciously called on the U.S. to halt attacks by CIA Predator and Reaper drones in NWFP and FATA, as I [reported](#) February 22, the CIA and Special Forces have been using the Shamsi airbase in Baluchistan for more than a year as a launching pad for drone attacks.

The New York-based whistleblowing intelligence and security website [Cryptome](#) published a series of [satellite images](#) as part of their “Eyeball” series on February 18. One image, captured in 2006 before construction of a huge hangar meant to conceal America’s robot killing machines was completed, show Predator drones on the Shamsi air strip.

According to Cryptome’s anonymous correspondent, “This is a very capable base facility with a large hangar in addition to the two Predator support hangars. Nearby is a large secured compound (appears empty) which could support up to a battalion of special ops and associated command and control. The large parking area inside the compound is perfect to land choppers and leave with relative security. All security measures seem fresh.” (“Surging Towards Disaster in the ‘Afpak Theatre’,” *Antifascist Calling*, February 22, 2009)

Despite Zardari’s compliance with the Global Godfather’s demands to use his nation as a launching pad for attacks on Pakistan’s citizens, the question remains: how long will the Army’s General Headquarters in Rawalpindi continue to support his discredited regime?

Army Chief of Staff Kayani, a former ISI director under Musharraf, is the current darling of the political and military elite in Washington, one with whom they can “do business.”

With Obama’s “Afpak” policy review nearing completion and after Zardari initially rejected the “compromise” brokered by Prime Minister Gilani and Kayani—with active “encouragement” by the U.S. Pentagon and State Department—will the United States, ever-fearful that a democratic alternative will “send the wrong message” to Pakistan’s oppressed workers and farmers, opt for the military “alternative”?

Meanwhile, the “Old Mole” Reemerges

In Pakistan, the struggle for civil liberties and basic democratic rights, is inextricably tied to “the severing,” as the *World Socialist Website* points out, “of the Pakistani-US strategic alliance, and the dismantling of the vast Pakistani military apparatus.”

One sign that the grip of the discredited PPP and PML-N, neoliberal parties that adhere to World Bank-IMF dictates, may be loosening up is the emergence of left-wing alternatives after decades of right-wing domination.

Farooq Tariq, general secretary of the socialist Labour Party Pakistan ([LPP](#)), [told](#) researcher Ron Jacobs that “what is transpiring in Pakistan is mass power.”

While conceding that the Lawyers’ Movement could not have emerged victorious without the rightist PML-N and the far-right Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami (JI), which had hitched their political wagons to the movement for opportunist ends, leftist forces have garnered new supporters based on the political reemergence of the trade unions and militant farmers’ organizations. According to Tariq, some 5,000 new supporters have joined LPP since January.

While the corporate media in Europe and the United States portray Pakistan as a nation in need of rule by a strong hand to stem the jihadi tide, the socialist and labor movements are reemerging with a vengeance, though you wouldn't know if you only read *The New York Times* or watched CNN.

As the situation heated-up, leftists' and labor leaders fell victim to particularly brutal attacks by the police and security services across Pakistan. The LPP [reported](#) that Nasir Mansoor, the organization's national labor secretary, was beaten up by Karachi cops and whisked away in an ambulance March 12 to an unknown location.

Dozens of LPP members and other left-wingers had been seized by police. In addition to LPP, a founding organization of the radical leftist Awami Jamhoori Tehreek (People's Democratic Movement, [AJT](#)), members of the National Workers Party, Awami Tehreek, Communist Mazdoor Kissan Party (CMKP), Pakistan Mazdoor Mehaz (PMM) and the Inqalabi Workers Committee had been seized.

Opposed to IMF-dictated economic "reforms," religious sectarianism and state repression, AJT has pledged "to strengthen the workers and peasants organization and special attention will be given to the issues of women and minorities. It calls for the abolition of all discriminatory laws against women and minorities. It has discussed the draft programme of the AJT which is mainly an anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist and feudal programme."

A threat to the existing set-up in Pakistan, the AJT was formed as a principled left-win response to the military bureaucracy and feudal oligarchs who rely on the Army and jihadists' to maintain their rule. According to the AJT's founding [document](#),

We consider that the religious extremism and militancy has grown beyond proportion, and is a new form of fascism. These forces blunt the people's social consciousness and keep them out of political process that resultantly facilitates exploitative forces to maintain an unjust and oppressive social order. The world imperialist forces have time and again used the religious extremists for their objectives. The ruling establishment in Pakistan has deep relationship with these forces, which have been extensively deployed within and beyond Pakistan by them. This anti-people lobby is responsible for promoting aggressive religious sectarianism in the country and they havoc played on Pakistan society in the name of religion. They are responsible for permanent military infiltration in our constitution and administrative structure. Their collaboration with the military junta has seriously prejudiced national independence and democratic image of the Pakistan state. (Programme of the AJT)

Asked by Jacobs to define the current situation in Pakistan, Tariq said:

There are multiple reasons for the constant unrest in Pakistan. The foremost reason is the inability of the ruling classes in Pakistan to solve all the basic problems faced by the masses. There exists a feudalistic relationship and land is not distributed to peasants. This brings a very feudal culture and atmosphere in Pakistan. Both the main bourgeois parties, PPP and PMLN, do not speak about it anymore. The major parts of the main leadership in both parties are from the feudal class. They use the ownership of land for political purposes and to win the elections. Sixty-one years of independence have brought no real independence for the majority of the people. This is the real crisis of leadership in Pakistan. Both main parties rely on the military generals. Even in this (most recent) crisis over the days from 12-16 March 2009, the army chief was mediating between the president, prime minister and the Nawaz brothers. The Nawaz brothers (said they) were very thankful to the

“positive” role of the army chief.

*The failure of reformist parties like the PPP paved the way for the growth of religious extremism. The extremists were and are supported by a major section of the army. It is a very complex relationship between the rich, the army and religious extremists. It changes and adjusts all the time. 9/11 made an indispensable difference to this relationship. The fact is that the support of the ruling class for religious extremism is not open as was the case in the past, but the presence of the American forces in the region has given a real momentum for the growth of the religious fundamentalists. (Ron Jacobs, “An Interview with Farooq Tariq: Pakistan in Turmoil,” *CounterPunch*, March 20-22, 2009)*

Neither Zardari, Sharif nor other capitalist grifters are capable of resolving Pakistan’s systemic crisis. Despite decades of harsh, merciless rule by oligarchs and the military, the Pakistani people are flexing their democratic muscles. Their struggle for basic economic and social rights despite the odds stacked against them, serve as an inspiration to all those who believe “another world is possible!”

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