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Pakistan

Four years under Musharaf

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General Musharaf has been in power for more than four years in Pakistan. Three years of this was under a naked military regime, while during the last year there was so-called democratic government with Musharaf as president.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/3563001.jpg>]

General Musharaf is a military dictator who, luckily for him, realized the world situation had changed profoundly after September 11 2001. As a result he changed his policies overnight in order to become a partner of American imperialism in the "fight against terrorism". At least in words, he junked life long support for religious fundamentalists. He abandoned these former allies to some extent without shame or apologies.

In return, world imperialism rewarded him by accepting his dictatorial rule without question. Existing loans were rescheduled and some new ones granted.

Musharaf became the darling of western rulers and a family friend of President Bush. He became the award-winning president of Pakistan who was invited by President Bush in June 2003 to Camp David, as the Pakistani government controlled media boasted.

General Musharaf also achieved this position by his hard work to please the international imperialist institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and World Trade Organization (WTO). He acted blindly on the advice of these institutions to implement their demands to restructure the public sector, carry through privatization, lower trade tariffs and take other deregulatory measures.

"This is the painful recipe that we must adopt if we are to overcome the economic recession and to begin to put our sick economy on the road to recovery" he boasted when he took power in October 1999 in a bloodless coup.

He had been able to overthrow an unpopular and rich Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Sharif was not able to complete his full five-year term even though he had a two-thirds majority in parliament, which had been elected in 1997.

Sharif had tried his best to implement the policies of the IMF, World Bank and WTO but was unable to do so because of massive resistance by the workers and small traders. General Musharaf took power precisely to implement the unfinished agenda of Nawaz Sharif.

Political front

The result of the subsequent implementation of these policies dictated by imperialism is a disaster for the working class of Pakistan. A recent report from the State Bank of Pakistan indicates an increase of at least 15% in poverty within the last three years - despite all the media hype of a great recovery of the Pakistan economy under Musharaf. The government claims that there is a record US\$11 billion of foreign reserves due to the policies of the regime.

The masses have lost all confidence in the main capitalist political parties. Now there is no difference in policies between the two mainstream parties, Benazir Bhutto's Pakistani Peoples' Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League of Nawaz Sharif. At one time they put forward quite different policies. The PPP was a populist radical party,

which at one time was able to attract many working class people.

Under Benazir Bhutto, the PPP has become a right wing conservative party closely linked at different times with the army generals and American imperialism. Benazir Bhutto was elected twice as Prime Minister (in 1988 and 1994) but was unable to deliver any reform agenda.

She is currently in exile after a court in Pakistan found her guilty of corruption. Since 1998, she has been living in Dubai and running her party via emails. Her husband has been in a Pakistani jail for the last seven years on charges of corruption, nepotism, murder and attempted murder.

The PPP emerged as the largest parliamentary party during the October 2002 General Elections with around 22 per cent of the votes. The PPP is at present part of an alliance called the Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (ARD) along with some of the other main bourgeois parties. The ARD has been unable to launch any mass agitation against the present regime despite its loud claims that it was doing this.

Religious fundamentalism

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/3563101.jpg>]

The distrust of the mass of people of the main political parties has led many people to take political refuge under an umbrella of religious parties. These parties have formed a united alliance called Mutihida Majlis Ammal (United Organization for Action). The MMA won over 15% of the votes in the October general elections. They have taken control of the provincial government in North West Frontier Province (NWFP), which is next to Afghanistan, and they are also part of the provincial government in Baluchistan.

The formation of this provincial government by the religious fundamentalists has given a major boost to the Taliban Mujahidin in Afghanistan. The US government wants Musharaf to carry out a crack down on this provincial government. The central government have led many raids on so-called Al Qaida hideouts in this province to please American imperialism and convince them that the Musharaf regime is serious about opposing religious fundamentalism.

The ongoing growth of religious fundamentalism in Pakistan is a serious threat to progressive forces in the country. There are several different trends within religious fundamentalist groups. But overall they are all united in their extreme right wing, semi fascist approaches to politics. They promote conservative "family values" that mean women are treated as having half the value of men - for example in legal cases two women's evidence is worth the same as one man.

Their anti imperialist sloganeering does not mean that they deserve to be seen as a real anti-imperialist force. They are semi-fascist forces who at this juncture of history oppose imperialism. The Labour Party Pakistan (LPP) is opposing both imperialism and the fundamentalists and advocates a broader front of all the progressive and Left organizations to provide a genuine alternative.

We are in favour of the state banning the Jihadi organizations that are advocating killings in the name of Islam. But we are totally opposed to any ban on religious organizations by the state. We want all the religious trends to have a full freedom to advocate their ideas in a democratic and peaceful manner. But we oppose those religious fanatics who are in favour of killing people from opposing religious sects and other individuals.

Religious fundamentalism has grown tremendously particularly after the collapse of Stalinism. To some extent it has provided a feeling of security for many ordinary Muslims. Some of the religious parties have built their infrastructures on a mass basis through running religious educational institutions, Mosques and charity organizations. During the eighties they had assistance from American imperialism. They also had tremendous help from the reactionary rulers of Saudi Arabia. They were just waiting for the right moment to really be able to develop a mass base. Now that time has come and they enjoy massive support among the mass of people - more when they stood in the General Elections in October 2002.

The religious parties grew with the help of the army and the state. You can say that religious fundamentalist forces in Pakistan grew mainly because of the significant economic and social help they received from different groups within the state. But that is only a part of the story.

They have also grown because of the tremendous disappointment that the main political parties caused by their failure to offer any social help to the masses during their period in office between 1988 and 1999. The religious parties have now offered an alternative to these capitalist feudal political parties.

But can these forces come to power in Pakistan? Would it be like Afghanistan or like Iran? It is difficult to imagine that the religious parties could come to power through elections. The bourgeoisie and American imperialist forces would not allow that to happen.

The religious parties can become junior partners in power but not the sole representatives of the people of Pakistan. The religious fundamentalist provincial government in NWFP is already under threat from the Centre and is not being tolerated.

The ongoing popularity of these religious fundamentalist groups has also increased the expectations of the mass of people that there will be some solution to their economic problems. Yet in NWFP, the MMA government has failed to address the questions of poverty and unemployment. They have tried to compromise with the Centre to be able to continue their government, although a bill is being introduced in the assembly to bring in Sharia law that will give maximum powers to the fundamentalist groups to monitor the Islamic functioning of the state and public institutions. But generally they have carried out policies dictated by the Centre. The result is that there is not a very favourable balance sheet of their carrying through the policies that led people to vote for them and many questions about their credibility have arisen.

But despite this experience, the religious parties are making headway in the most populated province of Punjab. They also control the largest city in Pakistan - Karachi. The Mayor elected in this city in 2001 is a member of Jamaat-I-Islami.

At the time when the armed forces are trying to find the remnants of the Taliban in Waziristan and other parts of the tribal belts, they seem to have forgotten that these Taliban also exist in cities like Karachi. It is not even in the slums of this city where these forces have been regrouping but in fact in the seat of learning, the University of Karachi. They demonstrated their power on November 5, 2003, in the Student Teaching Centre. Between eight to ten activists of Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba, the student wing of Jamat-I-Islami, the main religious fundamentalist party in Pakistan, attacked the hall, smashing the things which were on display. The attackers alleged that the exhibition was promoting obscenity and vulgarity, said a frightened student, on condition that they remained anonymous. "I do not know what is their idea of obscenity. You can see that we had clothes in the textile display, computers and posters of graphics and products of industrial designs", said a female student in her final year. She said that they did not even bother to look at the materials on display but they stormed the place and smashed anything that was in their range.

Incidents like this are very common where the religious fundamentalists have taken control of the educational institutions. The semi-fascist thugs are found in every major cities in growing numbers.

There are over 24,000 religious institutions called Madrassas in Pakistan. Over a million students are registered in these schools. The Musharaf regime fully supports these religious schools, claiming that not all religious schools promote Jihad.

Education in Pakistan is becoming more and more business orientated. Many public schools have become privatized. There are more primary school students in private institutions than in public primary schools. This is the natural result of the ever-reducing government spending on education. Less than 2% of the national income is spent on education in Pakistan.

But the military regime cannot keep the same old relationship with the religious fundamentalists as before September 2001. A bitter taste is gradually creeping into the relationship. The MMA, the major alliance of these religious fundamentalist parties, is threatening to launch a nationwide campaign on the question of democracy. The MMA along with the ARD is demanding that the Legal Framework Order (LFO) announced by General Musharaf be voted on by the parliament. This provision allows General Musharaf to legalize his three years of military government through a presidential ordinance and makes several amendments to the constitution.

Relationship with India

Pakistan and India have fought three wars during the last 56 years of so-called independence from the British imperialism. At present a peace fever has broken out between the Musharaf regime and Vajpayee's National Democratic Alliance government under the leadership of his Bhartiya Janata Party government in India.

This is despite the fact that the sour relationship between India and Pakistan was at its peak during the last three years. No road, train or air link was allowed by the two governments until three months ago. Now all the routes are going to be open within the next three months. This is mainly due to the pressure of US imperialism to open the borders, though mass pressure has also played a part.

At present American imperialism does not favour a war between India and Pakistan. It wants Musharaf's regime to take on the religious fundamentalists rather than a war against India. That is why the Musharaf regime is now bringing most of its army from the front line with India to the front line with Afghanistan. It has carried out military operations in the tribal areas between Afghanistan and Pakistan that were unthinkable in the past. The priorities of American imperialism in this region at this juncture of history is to put all efforts to stop Osama Bin Laden and his allies from taking over Afghanistan. But since the Pakistani religious fundamentalists have taken over the province next to Afghanistan, guerrilla activity has been on the increase. There is an increase in activities by the Taliban Jihadis against NATO forces in Afghanistan.

There is a tremendous desire amongst the mass of people for a peaceful atmosphere between the two countries. In India, animosity to Pakistan does not win votes for the Hindu fundamentalist BJP government as was manifested in the elections for four states in India on December 1, 2003. The BJP swept the board in these elections defeating the Congress Party, mainly because it was seen as a party that can bring some type of peace with Pakistan. This was unlike the situation in 2002, when the BJP took over Gujarat State while taking just the opposite political approach towards Pakistan.

This change is the result of people to people contact by many radical NGOs, political parties and trade unions on both sides of the border. The World Social Forum in India in February is being seen with a lot of enthusiasm in Pakistan and it is possible that over 5,000 Pakistani activists will attend. Over 100 activists of LPP have already registered to go to India. A Pakistan Social Forum is being organized with the help of LPP involving trade unions, radical NGOs and progressive political parties.

Both India and Pakistan have per capita incomes of less than \$400. The majority of government spending in both countries is on defence, with a huge social cost on both sides of the border. Infrastructure remains absolutely weak and there is instability at economic, political and social levels.

The political situation in Pakistan itself is quite volatile. The present set-up of a mixture of military and civil politicians is not very stable. The government is weak and has still not been able to legitimate itself in the eyes of the masses. It is still considered, and rightly so, a puppet government of the military with Musharaf as president. The Prime Minister, Jamali, who hails from Baluchistan, is heading a break away group of the conservative Muslim League. The ML has a long history to work together with the establishment to retain and remain in power.

The present government will find it very difficult to complete a full five-year term. Almost a year after the elections, it has faced crisis after crisis. One of the best comments on the present government has come from its Minister of Information Sheikh Rashid. He told a reporter that the best success of this government is that it is still in power after a year. The civilian set up under a general has tried its best to avoid any confrontation with the military by obeying all its orders without any question. But this situation cannot last for very long.

It is possible that the present so-called civilian government will be overthrown by General Musharaf if he feels at unease with the setup. He wants to have absolute powers like a dictator; but with a civilian Prime Minister he has to share some authority. General Musharaf can become even more dictatorial by declaring an emergency or even a martial law. A new period of military rule is not at all excluded. And with or without Musharaf himself, the military will be at the centre of power for some time - until a real mass movement erupts which can challenge this.

The Left

Left forces are very weak in Pakistan. The LPP is trying to reunite the forces of the left and a process of regroupment and reassessment of the situation is going on. The LPP is still a very small party but its ongoing activities for peasants' and workers' rights has won a lot of support and national recognition.

The LPP has led a peasant struggle on a military farm in Punjab to demand the right of the peasants to own the land currently occupied by the military. Seven peasants have lost their lives, hundreds have been arrested including the main leadership of LPP but it has not compromised or reconciled with the Army. The struggle is still going on. The peasants have occupied the land - over 68,000 acres. They are not paying any share of the crops that the government wants them to pay. They have challenged the unlawful claim of the military that they are the owners of the land by their three-year-old movement of civil disobedience. They are not paying the military and are telling them that they have "paid enough for over 100 years and no more".