



Pakistan coalition government collapses

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Only months after the elections that saw the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) elected to form a coalition government, Pakistan's fragile political stability has fractured and collapsed.

First in August ex-military dictator Pervez Musharraf resigned as soon as the coalition government made a move to try and impeach him. Musharraf is detested by most Pakistanis and in the face of popular mobilisations had to rely on the army, secret police and right-wing extremists to maintain his power.

Then on 25 August the PML-N, the junior partner in the coalition, pulled out claiming that the PPP had failed to fulfil its promise to reinstate 57 judges sacked by Musharraf last year as he desperately tried to cling onto power. The PPP leader Asif Al Zardari, who took over after the assassination of his wife Benazir Bhutto, delayed making a decision on the return of the judges because he knew at least one, ex Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry, intended to prosecute him for corruption. The Bhutto-Zardari family are one of Pakistan's richest landowning elites, deeply mired in corruption. Zardari's nickname is 'Mister Ten Per cent', which is what he is alleged to have pocketed from government deals he helped organise in the 1990s.

Three candidates, no choice

The three candidates for president all represent different parts of the establishment. All are committed to maintaining the profits of the big landowners and capitalists, and all support the US war drive under the banner of the so-called war on terror.

The PPP's candidate is none other than Zardari himself. The PML-N candidate is a supporter of Sharif from the judiciary, called Saeeduzzaman Siddiqui. The pro Musharraf party, the PML-Q, has nominated Mushahid Hussain Sayed, a former journalist and son of an army colonel.

Zardari will probably have enough support to be elected as President. But he has lost a lot of support from within his own party and amongst the wider population for what many people recognise as his manoeuvres to prevent prosecution for corruption. More worrying for his credibility were media reports that he has severe psychiatric problems.

None of the candidates has a programme to tackle the growing economic crisis which is driving millions of already impoverished Pakistanis into ever deeper misery and desperation. The global economic crisis is hitting Pakistan hard, with inflation in basic foodstuffs like rice, wheat and cooking oil at more than 25 per cent. No wonder there has been a wave of food riots across the country. Pakistan now does not have enough power to meet demand for domestic electricity, meaning that most areas of the country only have a few hours a day.

Another problem in Pakistan is the national question. National liberation movements in Swat and Balochistan have been waging a fierce battle with the government for independence, and militias in the North West Frontier Province are fighting alongside the Afghan resistance to deal heavy blows to the Pakistani military, who have lost control of much of the province.

The main political parties are all committed to the 'war on terror' and assisting the USA however they can. This exacerbates already tense situations in the country where the war on terror is widely understood to be just an excuse to extend US power, attack democratic rights and increase the power of the military.

Furthermore the Pakistani secret police force the feared ISI is a powerful and ambiguous factor in Pakistani politics. Centrally involved in setting up the Taliban in the 1980s to fight the Soviet Union, they were instructed to help hunt down the Taliban and Al-Qaeda when the war on terror started. But many suspect that the ISI is harbouring Jihadist militants and has direct links with them. A recent bombing in India was blamed by the Indian government on the ISI; one minister in the ruling party even threatened to respond "in kind" to the attack.

The battle for democracy and socialism

Carved out of India by the British in 1947 as a Muslim enclave to divide the Indian national liberation movement, Pakistan's politics very quickly came to be dominated by the military. Because the country was weak economically, and because of India's former alliance with the USSR, the Pakistani ruling class turned to the USA and became very reliant on aid and support from the world super power. This relationship continues today for instance a few months ago the US senate voted to send Pakistan \$1.5 billion of aid. Today the military runs huge conglomerates, making things as diverse as washing powder and breakfast cereal and taken as a whole it is responsible for at least 4 per cent of the country's gross domestic product.

A serious programme for change in Pakistan can only come from the bottom up, from the working classes and the peasants. The impasse over the judiciary demonstrates the weakness of the current system.

The masses are striving for democratic rights in a country dominated by the military. Yet the entire political system is mired in corruption, US interference and military patronage.

The masses should demand elections to a new constituent assembly to completely rewrite the constitution, abolishing the presidency and removing all vestiges of military control. Working class people and the urban poor need to form a new political party, a workers' party to fight for their interests and a socialist solution to the crisis.

That means indexing wages to prevent inflation further impoverishing the masses, it means nationalisation of the land and industry under workers control, cancellation of Pakistan's foreign debt, a huge programme of public works and investments to build Pakistan's infrastructure up to a decent level. Land redistribution and debt cancellation would help alleviate the suffering of the poorer peasants.

None of this can be achieved without a serious struggle to clear out the military from politics. To weaken the power of the generals and officers, Pakistani socialists therefore fight for the right for soldiers in the army to join trade unions and elect their officers. Bringing the fight for democracy into the ranks of the army is a key task in the fight for freedom: one that can only be achieved if the Pakistani working class comes to the head of the struggle for democracy and proceeds to form a government of workers and peasants that can take over the private property of the landowners and capitalists and create a socialist planned economy.

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