

Pakistan: on the verge of revolution

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Luke Cooper surveys the background to Pakistan's crisis and outlines the growing isolation of the military regime, the mounting movement of marches, strikes and armed clashes against the dictatorship, and the way forward for the working class and the poor.

Towards the end of 2006 there was talk in the Pakistan press that 2007 might prove a 'difficult' year for President Musharraf. The military Chief of Staff who seized power in 1999 was hoping to extend his five-year term, granted him unconstitutionally by the provincial and national assemblies in 2002. But Musharraf has become deeply unpopular in his own country because of his unflinching support for George Bush's 'war on terror.' At the same time he has become unpopular with the White House for failing to root out the Taliban bases in Pakistan's tribal areas.

Today we can see that predictions of a year of difficulties were, to put it mildly, an understatement. Speculation has now shifted to the theme 'can Musharraf survive?' The suspension of the Chief Justice of Pakistan, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, by the President prompted protests by lawyers that, by mid-May, had grown into mass demonstrations, armed street battles and a nationwide general strike paralysing all the main cities. In short, Pakistan had entered a pre-revolutionary crisis.

Musharraf's coup

On 12 October 1999 a military coup overthrew the government of Nawaz Sharif. In a dramatic series of events Sharif had removed the head of the Pakistan Army, General Pervez Musharraf, whilst the latter was out of the country. When Musharraf returned his aircraft was refused permission to land and circled Karachi airport, landing only after the coup had taken place and with only a few minutes flying time of its fuel remaining.

Sharif's party, the Pakistan Muslim League N (Nawaz), had won the 1997 elections by a landslide. This was Sharif's second term in office. The first started in November 1990 and ended in 1993 with resignation, amidst corruption charges. Conscious of role of the Pakistan judiciary in his previous political demise, Sharif's second term in office was marked by attempts to massively concentrate power in his own hands, in the process making many enemies in Pakistan's parliament, judiciary and military. Ironically in 1998 Pervez Musharraf benefited from Sharif's purging of 'disloyal' generals, leapfrogging several more senior officers to become the army's Chief of Staff in 1998.

Though Sharif's authoritarian attitude to the military won him few friends amongst the Pakistani ruling class, what proved his undoing was the deep economic and political crisis that Pakistan plunged into between 1998 and 1999. The country had suffered badly from the fallout of the 1997 East Asian financial crisis, accumulating domestic and foreign debts to the tune of \$43 billion. As the economy faltered, there was a headlong flight of capital out of the country - unstoppable for those who played by the rules of neoliberal globalisation. In addition, in 1998 Pakistan had become embroiled in a nuclear stand off with India, after both states tested nuclear weapons. The US-inspired international sanctions that followed only

exacerbated the economic turmoil within Pakistan.

The successful testing of nuclear weapons by Pakistan prompted the military and the powerful Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) into a military adventure. They deepened their support for incursions into Indian-occupied Kashmir by armed jihadi groups, such as Lakshar-e-Taiba and Harkat-al-Mujahideen. General Musharraf himself ordered Pakistani troops, dressed as jihadis, to seize strategically important positions in the town of Kargil before the Indian army could reoccupy posts they had abandoned for the winter months. The Pakistani armed forces made significant territorial gains.¹ But it ended in a political disaster.

Tit-for-tat shelling in a four-month stand off ensued, with both sides making thinly veiled threats that they might have recourse to nuclear weapons. Pakistan throughout operated a policy of 'plausible deniability' claiming that its forces were not involved in the fighting and that the guerrillas were simply Kashmiri Muslims, outside of their control. As the crisis deepened the forces of world imperialism tightened the screws on the Sharif government. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund froze the loans that were keeping the Pakistani economy afloat. On a trip to Washington to solicit aid from Bill Clinton, Sharif received a harsh ultimatum instead. Pakistan must either withdraw all its forces at once or face outright condemnation from US imperialism and further economic sanctions which would deepen the country's crisis.

Thus Sharif was faced with the task of ordering the Army and the ISI to retreat from Kargil, with not as much as a face-saving concession from India. Pakistan's top generals were furious. Sharif had hoped that joining the elite nuclear club and waging a border conflict with India would generate enough nationalist fervour to save his government. Musharraf had actually been consulted on the withdrawal and raised no objections to it. But when faced with angry army officers asking why he had climbed down, he put all the blame on Sharif.²

Sharif and Musharraf were obviously heading for a serious confrontation and there was talk of a possible military coup. Musharraf moved to demote supporters of Sharif within the armed forces, whilst Sharif prepared to 'retire' Musharraf. Sharif also solicited the support of the US government, sending his brother to Washington to warn of the threat of a coup and offer Bill Clinton a deal he could not refuse: in return for public support Sharif would close the camps training jihadi militants on the Afghan border and even send a special forces team to bring him the head of Osama Bin Laden.³ The Clinton Administration did indeed make statements that, while not explicitly supporting Sharif, urged all parties in Pakistan to respect constitutional democratic rule.⁴

Thus it was that after the October 12th military coup Musharraf declared himself Pakistan's 'chief executive'. In the two years of Sharif's government he had achieved a meteoric rise to power - from being only one of several generals, to Chief of Staff and finally Head of State.

The unpopularity of the Sharif regime meant that the coup passed with little popular protest. Indeed, the main bourgeois opposition party, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), led by Benazir Bhutto, actually welcomed the coup, only asking the military to move quickly to hold 'free and fair elections'⁵ Likewise, Imran Khan's Justice Party said the military coup was 'sadly inevitable' given the disaster that had beset Sharif's rule.⁶ Such foolish compliance by the 'democratic' bourgeois parties gave them little room for manoeuvre or much public sympathy when Musharraf later tightened his grip on power.

Though Musharraf faced very little domestic opposition he had one major problem. The last coup of the 20th century, unlike most of those that preceded it, had not been the outcome of a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) directive. Quite the opposite, it was unsanctioned. The hawkish American journal Foreign Affairs summed up the mood of much of the American ruling class, when it mused: 'exactly where

Musharraf stood on using nuclear weapons, transferring nuclear technology to Islamic fundamentalist friends, or provoking further conflict with long time enemy India was a bleak and scary unknown.?

Certainly Musharraf was not looking for a conflict with America. On the contrary he wanted to maintain Pakistan's historic client relationship, dating from the Cold War when India was 'non-aligned' and consequently regarded by the USA as a disguised client of the USSR. Pakistan, armed to the teeth by Washington, was one of the latter's regional gendarmes. It had played a crucial role in Washington's proxy war to destabilise the pro-Soviet Afghan regime between 1978 and 1992. Likewise it was an essential check on the hostile Iranian regime.

The problem Musharraf faced was how to combine this crucial external alliance with equally historic domestic and regional policies of Pakistan's ruling class: the alliance with the Pashtun tribes of the northwest frontier and intervention in Afghanistan to ensure a friendly regime there. The Pakistan military's sponsorship of the 1996-2001 Taliban regime would, particularly after 9/11, lead to a head on clash with the geopolitical strategy of the United States.

Political Islamism and the Military

The role of political Islam in Pakistan is a complex one. At the time of partition the country was founded as a Muslim state and thus Islam has always played an important role in political life. Outright secularism, such as India's, has never been a significant political trend. Nevertheless at one level political parties and movements are usually described by their position on a spectrum stretching from muslim 'modernisers' or 'moderates' to 'fundamentalists'. The dominant bourgeois political parties have traditionally held to a moderate view of Islam, seeing it as quite compatible with a modern market economy and close collaboration with the west. On the other hand the fundamentalists want to see a society operating on the basis of Sharia law and even point to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan as a model, one which some madrassahs or Islamic schools in Pakistan had an important role in generating. While most of the main Pakistani political parties are categorised as either 'moderate' or 'fundamentalist', it actually reveals little about the true political and social dynamics of the country.

This is because 'moderates' in Pakistan's establishment have frequently turned to political Islam and radical Islamic forces to stabilise their rule, particularly since General Zia ul-Haq took power in a military coup in 1977. He cultivated support amongst radical Islamic currents by integrating elements of Sharia law into Pakistan's legal code. By appealing to Islam to give his dictatorial regime a *raison d'être* and cultivating radical Islamic supporters on the streets, Zia was able to offset the dangers of a popular revolt against him. Critically, Zia took advantage of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 to deepen his links with the United States and aid them in fighting a war by proxy ? by arming the Islamic militants of the Mujahideen.

It was in this period that Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence agency (ISI) assumed a critical role not only in aiding the CIA's operations in Afghanistan, but also in policing and organising Pakistan's politics. The ISI formed the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) as a sectarian party, who purported to represent the Muhajir, the Urdu speaking ethnic group who migrated to Pakistan from India following the reactionary partition in 1947. This was part of a campaign by Zia to break the hold of the PPP in Sindh province, traditionally their stronghold, by dividing their popular support on ethnic lines. The MQM were, and still are, a fascistic organisation that practices communalist violence against non-Muhajir ethnic and religious groups. In addition, the ISI encouraged the development of increasing sectarian religious violence between Shia and Sunni throughout the 1980s. Thus the military regime has 'popular' street forces at its disposal, highly armed and able to count on the benevolent neutrality if not outright support of the military. They can be used against political opponents of the regime and workers in struggle. It derives power as a

bonapartist regime by fomenting conflict and then 'keeping order'?

Inter-Service Intelligence Agency

For Zia and the Pakistani military, encouraging sectarian divisions and cultivating pro-regime reactionary organisations were key to maintaining their rule. Indeed, the fact that a number of contemporary fundamentalist Islamic groups in Pakistan trace their lineage to the Zia regime is not simply because he popularised radical Islam, but because the ISI in particular gave material support to their development, seeing them as a powerful force with which to keep down the working class. In the post-Zia years the ISI has continued to be associated with radical Islamic groups domestically and in Kashmir and Afghanistan. This has given the ISI a reputation as a rogue force, operating as a 'state with a state', with a number of elements within its ranks that have genuine political sympathies for such forces.⁸

The military however do not simply represent the same interests as the ISI. Its traditional 'governmental' role in Pakistan – half the lifetime of the state has been under military regimes – has not only created a culture of political interference within its ranks. It has also accumulated a substantial social-economic stake in society at large. Indeed it is a major property owner, which gives it the material power to develop substantial networks of patronage.⁹ As Ayesha Siddiqi notes, the military's vast economic interests include 'four military welfare foundations (valued at around \$2 billion)... [and] hundreds of large-, medium- and small-scale business ventures which the military more or less directly runs. For instance, one major cargo transport giant is a military firm; and other army units have run everything from petrol-pumps to toll-levies on a national highway. The estimated total worth of this economy exceeds \$100 billion.'¹⁰

So, to speak of 'the military' in Pakistan is to describe much more than the armed wing of the bourgeois state – rather, it is a substantial political and economic force in its own right. As such, it seeks to maintain Pakistan's integration into the world capitalist system and ideologically sees itself as a 'modernist' trend in Pakistan. However it combines this with a powerful sense of pragmatism and realpolitik. This extends to international relations too; it places strategic value in fostering an alliance with the United States, in recognition of its global economic and political hegemony, while also pursuing its own regional interests forthrightly. It is as we have said one of the USA's gendarmes, albeit one that can get out of control in certain circumstances.

The United States and the Islamists

Musharraf's period in power has, from the very outset, grappled with the problem that these roles have begun to conflict with one another. In order to repair relations with the USA, Musharraf did not plan to continue the Kargil War, but he hoped that Washington would intervene to force negotiations over a Kashmir settlement. This hope was in vain. The USA had not supported the coup and Clinton remained hostile; in his visit in March 2000 he explicitly criticised the coup and made it clear the US would not oversee negotiations on Kashmir.¹¹ Musharraf did not help his case by telling Clinton, probably correctly, that the Pakistan-led raid to seize Bin Laden, which Sharif had promised, was a pipe dream.¹² Moreover Pakistan would remain one of the only international states to recognise the Taliban regime in Kabul.

At home, Musharraf had to consolidate his power. The support the PPP had given to the coup gave him the room to manoeuvre he needed and he suspended the constitution and proceeded to try Sharif on terrorism and corruption charges. In May 2001 the Supreme Court legalised his regime on the basis that the army had 'acted in the interests of the people', just as they had done for the military dictatorships installed in 1958 and 1977.¹³ In June 2001 Musharraf formally became president. In the referendum that followed (the opposition boycotted it), Musharraf was granted a five year term – subject to being elected by the incoming provincial and national assemblies, elections for which the Supreme Court committed him to

holding in 2002.

This meant that Musharraf needed to assemble some sort of political force to support him. He did so not on the basis of ideology but patronage. He was able to win the support of the large Pakistani landlords in the national assembly who had supported Zia's regime and, indeed, rarely sat with the opposition. In addition, he won defectors from Sharif's party, by harnessing the economic power of the military: his new loyalists realised they would be richly rewarded. In the same manner he later purchased votes of PPP assembly members to establish a secure majority.

In this way the Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam) (PML-Q) was formed. In addition, Musharraf continued the military's historic engagement with fascistic sectarian and Islamic forces the MQM supported his rule and episodic agreements have also been struck with an alliance of fundamentalist groups, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA). Despite piecing together this alliance, the Pakistan military is widely believed to have rigged the 2002 elections that returned Musharraf to power for five years.

September 11 2001: A Decisive Change?

The question of how Musharraf and the army related to the country's Islamist forces became a critical one for the regime after the 9/11 attacks. The USA made it clear, in no uncertain terms, that Pakistan had to choose the Taliban regime and its Pakistani supporters or the world policeman. Bush sent his proconsul Richard Armitage, Deputy Secretary of State, to make this brutally clear to Musharraf. On 12 September he demanded that Pakistan support the 'war on terror' or face 'being bombed back to the stone age.'¹⁴ For Musharraf, there was no point continuing to support the Taliban once it was clear the Americans were going to overthrow them. So, he made a snap decision, acceding to all Armitage's demands even before he consulted Pakistan's military top brass.¹⁵

The dramatic change in policy was to define the Musharraf regime. By giving unequivocal support for the 'war on terror', Musharraf immediately won some \$1 billion dollars in aid and debt restructuring from the USA. He also rebranded himself to the world as a moderate, western-minded progressive who was fighting Islamic fundamentalism at home. While Bill Clinton had castigated Musharraf publicly for stifling democracy, the new line in Washington was that 'the uniform issue' was an internal matter for Pakistan and it was not their place to comment.

However, Musharraf's new policy was soon to be tested to breaking point. In December 2001 two Islamic militant groups, both historically linked to the ISI, the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), launched an attack on the Indian parliament building, leaving fourteen dead. A military stand off between India and Pakistan ensued with both launching a troop build-up either side of the 'line of control' between Indian and Pakistani occupied parts of Kashmir. Musharraf's handling of the crisis expressed the new turn he had agreed with Richard Armitage. Despite not wanting to lose face at home by conceding too quickly to Indian demands, the crisis was eventually defused because Musharraf made assurances that he would move against the Islamic radicals in Pakistan and rein in their international operations.

In the period since, it is debatable to what extent Musharraf actually has or even could rein in Islamic militants. First, as outlined above, the Pakistani military and the ISI had for over twenty years developed extensive links with Islamist radical forces, particularly those fighting in Kashmir. However, they were not simply under the control of the military and had become real 'social movements' in their own right, via their madrassahs and charitable foundations. As Lal Khan argues the state had created 'Frankenstein monsters now outside their control'.¹⁶

Second, moving against the Islamic militants conflicted with Musharraf's over-riding aim: to survive in

power at all costs. To get round this problem, Musharraf has played a clever game, manipulating appearance and reality.

He has staged a series of conflicts with the Islamic fundamentalists, only to climb down and concede to their demands.¹⁷ For instance, in 2006 Musharraf sent a draft to the national assembly to amend the deeply reactionary rape laws brought in by Zia in 1979 ? it outraged the Islamists and was withdrawn.¹⁸ Likewise, in 2004 Musharraf proposed a change in the law that would mean passport applicants did not have to declare their religion ? it outraged the Islamists and was withdrawn.¹⁹ In this way, Musharraf can present himself as trying, in a ?difficult situation?, to fight the Islamists while in fact conceding to their demands and leaning on them for support.

On the military terrain Musharraf has also failed to defeat the militants using Southern Waziristan as a base for operations against British and American forces in Afghanistan. In 2002, on the orders of the United States, Musharraf established military bases in the region. The Pakistani army has since waged a protracted armed conflict but one that it has effectively lost ? signing peace treaties with militants in 2004 and again in 2006. This stop-start conflict contrasts with the continuous eight year struggle the army has waged against separatists in Balochistan ? who are demanding the region benefits from its oil and gas reserves.

Musharraf's offensive against the working class

Immediately after his coup, Musharraf's key concern was to restore the confidence of the international money markets in Pakistan's crisis-ridden economy. He went to the International Monetary Fund to secure a loan to keep the economy afloat. As a condition the IMF demanded its usual package of attacks on the living standards of the masses.

This took the form of a tax on the sale of food stuffs, which angered Pakistan's traders. Musharraf faced the traders' protests down, imposed the tax and secured the loan. At the same time, as a sop to the traditional strata, he withdrew proposals to weaken the country's blasphemy laws because of opposition from the mullahs. This pattern of intransigence on the neoliberal reforms and softness on Islamic forces has been a feature of his rule.²⁰

On the insistence of the IMF, World Bank and Pakistan's own bourgeoisie, Musharraf has launched a series of fierce neoliberal attacks on the working class. He has aggressively sought to raise the level of exploitation of Pakistani workers and increase labour movement flexibility, bringing forward changes to Pakistan's labour code that ?effectively increased daily work hours, reduced overtime compensation, and created a new category of ?contract worker? not entitled to legal compensation for overtime work.?²¹ The unions and NGOs described the changes as taking workers' rights ?back to the 17th century.?²²

These attacks on workers' rights have gone alongside a huge programme of privatisation. Between 1999 and 2006 \$5 billion dollars²³ of state assets were sold off, including telecommunications and energy. Typically, they were sold on the cheap to friends and family of top level military personnel themselves. This, added to the generous debt restructuring and aid programmes Musharraf received by acquiescing to the demands of US policy makers, has created something of an economic boom. This is expressed in a year-on-year growth of gross domestic product, a booming stock market, an external debt reduced to 52% of GDP (down from 80% in 1999) and the establishment of relatively strong foreign exchange reserves.²⁴ Typically for neoliberal development programmes the benefits of this economic boom accrued overwhelmingly to the rich. Indeed, Pakistan has seen a sharp increase in its ?Gini Coefficient? ? a commonly used measurement of income inequality.²⁵ Furthermore, a recent World Bank report claimed that 72% of Pakistan's people live below the poverty line.²⁶

In agriculture the military has pursued an aggressive policy of dispossessing poor peasant tenants on state-owned land and transferring control of production to military personnel in return for modest rents ? a process that has led to it controlling some 11.58 million acres. 27 The land that is now owned by the military and the state is exploited by a handful of landowning families who run vast estates. This gives agriculture in Pakistan a semi-feudal character as the oppressed peasants in both military and private estates are treated economically and socially like serfs ? with little opportunity to move off the land and forced to give up a substantial part of their crop to the landowners.28 This has led to the emergence of peasant movements demanding land to those who till it and in February a mass conference brought together some 6,000 people.29

The working class too has mobilised against the neoliberal attacks. Indeed, Musharraf's rule has been marked by persistent, if sectional, conflicts with workers. For instance, in the last period telecom workers fought government privatisation plans and the rail workers operated a work to rule against breaches of health and safety regulations. The number of struggles (these are just a few examples) is significant because of the historic weakness of Pakistan's union movement. The Pakistan labour force numbers a total of 48 million out of a population of 150 million, and of these just one million (three per cent) are organised in the trade unions; even these are dispersed across some 7,204 unions.30

The trade union movement has historically been marked by political divisions stretching back to the regime of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Benazir's father, who was overthrown by Genral Zia-ul-Haq in 1977 and judicially murdered in 1979. In this period rival PPP and Islamic federations were formed. These divisions, combined with fierce state repression, have led to the unions' weakness. While Zia and the military peddled a ferocious anti-worker programme, none of the political forces in Pakistan have a clean record.31 For example, though under Bhutto the trade union movement reached its peak with high union density and militant organisation, he later unleashed a reign of terror against the trade union leadership and workers, with police even firing at striking Landhi workers in 1972.32

Over several decades trade unions in Pakistan have become used to fierce state repression. As one would expect, this has intensified under Musharraf, with arrests of trade union activists and attacks by Islamists commonplace. For example, in April employers at the Taunsa Barrage construction site filed reports with the police accusing trade union organisers struggling for the eight hour day (they are currently made to work fourteen to sixteen hours) of terrorism and disrupting state functions.33 Typically, such charges will be brought by the police after the struggle, with the organisers targeted once the workers have demobilised.

Is Musharraf finished?

State repression, reactionary Islamist and communalist harassment and low trade union density make the struggles of the last period all the more remarkable. One of the most militant sections of workers has been the Pakistan steel workers. In March 2002 they occupied a number of steel plants against a corrupt military colonel who had been making dangerous cuts to maintenance in order to siphon off personal profits ? through militant action including a highway blockade the workers quickly won all their demands.34 However, this militancy did not stop the military attempting to sell off Pakistan Steel as part of their privatisation programme in 2006. The government proposed to sell the asset with a market value of around 700 billion rupees for just 21.6 billion rupees, sparking the mobilisation of the workers in a high profile campaign.

In a supreme court hearing the then Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry declared the privatisation unlawful ? a decision that enraged the regime. In doing so, Chaudhry, whether it was his intent or not, established himself as a thorn in the side of the regime . After all, Pakistan's judiciary has historically been completely subservient to the wishes and ambitions of the military. The defeat on privatisation must have

been all the more bitter a pill to swallow, given Musharraf had appointed Chaudhry as Chief Justice in 2005 and expected him to be a compliant servant of the regime.

This defeat in the courts alarmed Musharraf. He desperately wanted to maintain his and the army's rule beyond the five year mandate he received in 2002. Thus he had two choices. He could have the existing pro-regime local and provincial assemblies elect him (in clear breach of the constitution) or he could call new elections and rig them. Either way, he would need the support of the judiciary. This led Musharraf to move quickly. In an act reminiscent of the ruthlessness he had shown when he demoted key supporters of Nawaz Sharif in the army prior to the coup, he suspended Justice Chaudhry at the beginning of March. He charged him with unspecified acts of 'misconduct', 'misuse of authority' and 'actions prejudicial to the dignity of office of the chief justice of Pakistan'.

In response thousands of lawyers across Pakistan boycotted courts and protested against the regime. In the weeks that followed the movement became an outlet for the growing discontent with the corrupt and pro-imperialist regime.³⁵ The demand of the lawyers was for an independent judiciary.

What attitude should Marxists adopt to these movements? First, the slogan of an independent judiciary was a progressive one in this instance insofar as it meant independence from military rule. Of course, for Marxists the judiciary is never 'independent' but a privileged component of the bourgeois state that will ultimately defend capital against the workers.³⁶ But the importance of the lawyers' movement was that it could act as a springboard to a mass movement against military rule. From the outset by openly challenging Musharraf it had an anti-regime dynamic despite the weak slogans of its leadership.

In Pakistan the REVOLUTION youth group and supporters of the League for the Fifth International participated actively in the movement, recognising it had the potential to be transformed into a mass movement against military rule. The central question was fighting to bring in wider layers beyond the lawyers and generalise it into a struggle to overthrow the regime. As we argued in March: 'The protests certainly have the potential to be transformed into a mass movement against military rule. Many of the leaders of the working class organisations and social movements openly oppose the dictatorship but now must be the time for action not words. We need mass demonstrations, blockades, strikes and direct actions to bring down the regime.'

We argued the movement had to turn towards the working class, and the working class movement should involve itself to the full with the movement against the regime. In this way, the struggle for the overthrow of the regime could be linked to the class struggle of the workers against the bosses and neoliberalism. We argued the working class needed to elect democratic committees of delegates in every workplace, coordinated across towns, regions and nationally, to advance this struggle. In addition, the clear democratic demand to advance must be for a sovereign constituent assembly, under the control of the mass movement. If this demand were won, in such an assembly the working class political forces must propose the expropriation of the rich landowners and the capitalists and fight for a workers' and peasants government, based on the action councils. It must fight too for an immediate break with the USA, the expulsion of its military personnel from the country and an end to all support for its 'war on terror'. In short, the goal of Marxists is to bring the working class to the head of the struggle, to turn the struggle for democracy, for land and higher wages, the basic needs of the unemployed, into a fight for working class power and socialism.

A major turning point for this movement came in Lahore when tens of thousands of people turned out to greet Justice Chaudhry, whose motorcade numbered some 2,000 vehicles, as it travelled to the city from Islamabad. Chaudhry was addressing a meeting of the Lahore High Court Bar Association. The size and militancy of the demonstration marked a profound challenge to the rule of Musharraf. To back down and

drop the suspension of Chaudhry would have shown serious weakness and marked a major victory for the opposition, emboldening them to make yet more challenges. Thus, to maintain his power, Musharraf was left with little option to fight back aggressively. To do so he looked to the military's old friends in the MQM. By using a proxy, he could later distance himself from the violence while sending the same message to the masses: 'defy military rule at your peril'. On 12 May Chaudhry was due to speak in Karachi in Sindh province. It was because Karachi has a left-wing tradition that the ISI had set up the MQM in the first place. Now, they called on their fascistic shock troops to break up the opposition rally by force. On Friday 11 May the MQM blockaded the main roads into the city in an attempt to prevent the rally from taking place, with the open complicity of government agencies. In Karachi that week, in a bid to muzzle media reporting of the anti-government protests, state forces closed three television stations.

Despite this thousands of protesters defiantly mobilised, and as they rallied the MQM opened fire and several hours of pitched battles ensued. Musharraf ordered some 14,000 troops on to the streets of Karachi and the Chief Justice was detained at the airport by the security forces. The clashes continued into Sunday with the government operating a policy of undeclared marshal law. 'Assemblies' of over five people were banned and the Sindh provincial government, which is pro-Musharraf, said it would expel leading opposition activists from the province. The fighting continued into the following week with low level fighting still reported. Over 50 people are reported to have been killed and some 150 more injured.

Musharraf now had the blood of his own people on his hands. Nevertheless he was cold and defiant as he addressed his supporters in the more moderate Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam) at a rally in Islamabad on 12th May. This rally had been planned for a number of weeks with many state employees forced to attend and participants even promised as much as one thousand rupees (12 euros)! Despite this Musharraf only managed to gather 20,000 'supporters'. He blamed the unrest in Karachi on the protesters who had 'politicised the suspension of the Chief Judge' and pointed to the MQM rally as evidence of his continued popular support 'the MQM rally had, of course, been allowed to take place without interference on Saturday.

Musharraf added that he would seek re-election from the sitting provincial and national assemblies this year for another five-year term and declared the 'people are with me'. This would be done, he argued, without any new elections for the provisional and national assemblies. On Monday 14 May it had become clear that 'the people' were not with Musharraf, since all the large cities were paralysed by a national strike called by the bourgeois parties in the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy ' particularly the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League (N). The fact that these parties called such action is an indicator of the tremendous pressure from below. The working class had responded to the crackdown on dissent with sheer defiance. As the lawyers' movement had gathered momentum the bourgeois parties, particularly the PML-N and PPP, had begun to organise in it. However, they had not expected the movement and during Musharraf's rule the opposition they had mounted was focused on parliamentary manoeuvres. In addition, the two parties had both lost members to Musharraf's regime, attracted by corrupt financial incentives. Even during the movement the PPP had admitted it was in talks with Musharraf to do a deal but these had broken down on Musharraf's insistence that he would remain both head of the army and state. Neither of these parties offers a programme qualitatively different to that of Musharraf. They are both bosses' parties who will observe the dictates of the West ' both economic neoliberalism and support for the war on terror, albeit the PML(N) is less overtly pro-West, appealing as it does for support on the basis of conservative, Islamic values. Both of these parties express continuity with corrupt 'democratic' bourgeois regimes of the 1990s.

The support they have given to the movement, including the dramatic strike action on May 14, indicate the massive pressure for change from the masses.

Pakistan had clearly entered a pre-revolutionary situation, i.e. to say one that could quickly be turned into a revolutionary situation, or suffer defeats that push it backwards. In this situation, there is a clear opportunity for a revolutionary struggle for power by the working class that fights for a workers' and peasants' government, based on democratic councils and established through a revolutionary uprising. The real danger now is that the PPP and PML(N) could lead the movement into a reactionary settlement based upon an undemocratic 'civilian' government of technocrats and bourgeois politicians.

It is vital revolutionaries warn of this danger and advance as an alternative a revolutionary constituent assembly under the democratic control of local popular assemblies. Its deputies should be instantly recallable by their electors. As the 'highest' form of bourgeois democracy, we of course recognise that this is no substitute for a government based on the power of the armed workers and peasants. This is why in any constituent assembly workers continue the class struggle; fighting to expropriate the bourgeoisie and form a workers and peasants government.

On 14 May the working class, by paralysing the cities with strike action, have demonstrated in practice they have a leading role to play in revolutionary struggle to overthrow the regime. It is now vital that a revolutionary party of the most advanced workers is formed in Pakistan, committed to leading the struggle of the working class and peasants against the regime to the conquest of power. This is what the League for the Fifth International and our supporters in Pakistan are fighting for.

ENDNOTES

1 It has been since alleged by former president Sharif that the gains made by the Pakistan army were exaggerated and they suffered some 4,000 casualties far more than India.

2 Bennet Jones, Pakistan; Eye of the Storm, pp.40-41, 2002. Yale, Yale University Press

3 Bennet Jones, ibid

4 Bennet Jones, ibid

5 BBC Website, 'Opposition happy at Sharif

dismissal'http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/473124.stm

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7 Sheri Prasso and Shahid-ur-Rehman, 'The World's Worst Nuclear Nightmare'; Pakistan's coup has put a risk-taking general in charge, Foreign Affairs, No. 3642, October 25th 1999

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Party. More recently, they have maintained this view in relation to the revolutionary developments in Venezuela.

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Links:

[1] http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/1750265.stm

[2] http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-india_pakistan/pakistan_crisis_4622.jsp

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