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Pakistan Collapsing, Musharraf Must Go

Von Farooq Tariq / 17. Januar 2008

PAKISTAN IS ON the fast track to collapse under the Pervez Musharraf dictatorship. The state is in immense crisis. The infrastructure, industrial and social, is in total chaos. The economic crisis is showing its muscles. Inflation is uncontrollable and unemployment is ever increasing.

The vast majority of ordinary people of Pakistan believe that he will never leave power alive: "If he is not killed, he will kill us all one by one." He has become the most unpopular president of Pakistan. Musharraf is widely seen as a person who has orchestrated the murder of Benazir Bhutto. "Qaatal Qaatal Musharraf Qaatal" ("Murderer the murderer, Musharraf the murderer") was the main slogan of the mass reaction.

All the twist and turns of the Musharraf dictatorship after the murder has strengthened the doubts of the masses in this regard. "He asked her to come to Pakistan by negotiating and let her be killed" is a remark you hear very often. Despite that, Musharraf has consistently shown that he will stick to power by any means: "He is the ultimate power," "Pakistan needs him, Pakistan first," "Pakistan my top priority" is some of his routine sloganeering.

Here in Pakistan, however, many do not trust him anymore here. The desperation of the masses to remove Musharraf is clear everywhere. The mass movement had attempted to throw him out of power after the assassination of Benazir. This was an unprecedented movement for five days from 27 December, 2007. Not a single shop was open, no wheel on the move, no factory working, no bank open, no office functioning, no restaurant or hotel open, no train on the move, flights cancelled, schools and colleges closed and thousands and thousands were on the road protesting — this was the most unexpected outburst of mass anger after the killing.

Nevertheless, unfortunately, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) leadership had not learned from history. They saw in this crisis an important occasion to show that they are the responsible defender of the system. They appealed to the masses to cool down, go back to their work and turn their anger into votes for the Pakistan Peoples Party.

This was the time when the majority of the political parties had declared a boycott of the elections and demanded Musharraf's immediate resignation. Had the PPP joined other parties in boycotting the general elections, Musharraf would have gone by now.

They had not realized the post-assassination scenario or anticipated the total collapse of the economy in the following days. They had not thought of the tactics Musharraf's supporters would use to rig the election if given the chance. In the Sind province (the PPP's stronghold) alone, over 4000 First Investigation Reports (FIR) has been registered by police against a record number of half a million PPP and other opposition political activists. Many PPP activists were arrested to be released on bail later. Many thousands have gone to secure bail even before being arrested.

The tactics of the PPP leadership put the party in a defensive position. Three weeks after the Benazir Bhutto assassination, the PPP is on the run. Yet Musharraf had been on the defensive after the killing. He was relieved when the PPP leadership took the decision to participate in the elections. At a time when the consciousness of the whole of Pakistan was anti-Musharraf, with the active participation in the mass movement, the PPP leadership's announcement to participate in elections was like a fire truck putting cold water on the boiling heat.

Moreover, what kind of election is taking place on 18 February? Before the announcement of the general election, 60 top judges were put under house arrest on 3 November 2007 when martial law was imposed in the name of emergency; many are still in house arrest, particularly Chief Justice Iftikhar Ahmed Choudhry. As of 14 January, all public meetings and election rallies were banned for a month on the name of "security." Thus, effectively, there is not going to be any mass campaigning by political parties.

Most of the opposition parties that are taking part in the elections are already complaining that it will be rigged, and that they have proof of rigging in the voting lists. All the rules laid out by the Election Commission of Pakistan about the size and width of the posters, pamphlets, stickers, signboards and banners have been widely violated by most of the candidates.

It is race of money among the candidates, like a business competition — not a democracy that is going to be restored by the election, but a mockery of democracy. The general election has given the masses a chance to choose among exploiters. The condition that a candidate must be at least a university graduate means that less than one percent of the whole population had a chance to become candidates.

Three weeks after the assassination of Benazir, on 17 January 2008, there is unprecedented price hikes for everything. Wheat flour, the most used food item in Pakistan, has shot up from 13 Rupees a kilogram to 25 to 50 Rupees, if you can find it in shops. After failing to buy the wheat flour from the government concessional utility store, some women have attempted suicide. Food riots have been reported in many parts of the country.

There is regular news on television and newspapers that "smugglers" of wheat flour have been arrested. Previously smuggling was normally restricted to gold and electronic items. Now wheat flour "smugglers" are the main enemies of Pakistan. Almost every province has restricted the transportation of wheat flour, creating more problems for the people of North West Frontier Province, Baluchistan and many in Afghanistan who are dependent on wheat flour from Punjab and Sind.

There are also massive electricity crises. Electricity is released on a load-shedding basis, with electricity available for 10 to 12 hours a day in most parts of the country. The countryside is worst hit by this shortage. There is no commercial gas available to industries for the last two weeks, thus closing down hundreds of factories. Even hospitals are not spared. Hundreds of thousands of workers have been laid off from the factories; they are asked to wait until electricity and gas is fully restored.

LPG gas has disappeared. The price has gone up from 50 Rupees a kilogram to 100/110 Rupees a kilogram, if you can find one LPG gas shop open. The price of one kilogram of vegetables has gone from 100 Rupees to 125 Rupees. There is almost a 25 percent price hike of everything available in shops and supermarkets. Yet there is neither a wage increase nor any temporary compensation for the people.

This is fertile ground for the very rich politicians from Muslim League Q, who are the main supporters of Musharraf. They will buy votes in bulk for the general election. The hardship of life under Musharraf, with the PPP taking part in the election, may cut across the massive sympathy wave that PPP is counting on.

The Musharraf dictatorship, however, has failed to curb the ongoing suicide attacks. Religious fundamentalists groups in Waziristan and Swat are not backing down. Despite a heavy military operation, they are striking back repeatedly. On 16 January, a group of religious extremists occupied a fort in North Waziristan, which was used by Pakistan military. The newspapers reported eight army men killed with 20 disappeared, while unconfirmed reports put the casualties much higher. The government reported 50 militants were killed.

There are several incidents where most of the suicide attackers have been less than 16 years of age. The completely new generation has been motivated by religious fundamentalists to make an all-out war against the friends of imperialism and "enemies of Islam."

There is also much discontent among the police force and bureaucracy. They are sick and tired of being used against the masses. Many police officers speak against the Musharraf government to their friends and contacts. There is no support among the public employees for the military dictatorship, but they are forced to go on.

The Musharraf dictatorship is isolated and the most hated in the history of Pakistan. It is a dictatorship supported only by American imperialism and its allies. It is trying its best to survive. However, the days of the military regime are numbered. It cannot survive for long despite all the help of its political friends. Musharraf has survived through the most modern security arrangements available, but these will not work all the time in the wake of tremendous hatred that is building up.

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Dieser Beitrag wurde publiziert am Donnerstag den 17. Januar 2008
in der Kategorie: **isl, Pakistan.**