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Pakistan

# A government in pandemonium

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**Instability, price hikes, growing unemployment and rising debts are the hallmarks of the first nine months of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) government. There are daily demonstrations across Pakistan around one or another of these issues.**

[[http://internationalviewpoint.org/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH245/Bush\\_and\\_Zardari\\_2008-9-23-acc1d.jpg](http://internationalviewpoint.org/local/cache-vignettes/L400xH245/Bush_and_Zardari_2008-9-23-acc1d.jpg)] **George W. Bush shakes hands with President Asif Ali Zardari**

There is a real danger of a war between Pakistan and India after the Mumbai terrorist attack on November 26. The statement by Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari about the doubtful Pakistani identity of Ajmal Qasab, the only terrorist captured alive, did not go down very well within the Indian establishment. The joint war-room meeting of all the Indian government's important officials is a very serious matter.

The PPP government is taking a very non-serious attitude towards the religious fanatics. On one side, it wants to please US imperialism and banned Jamat Dawa, a fundamentalist group in Pakistan claiming it is doing charity work. However, it is clear that all its charity work is for Jihad. Jamat Dawa openly has been advocating attacks on Hindus. On the other side, the PPP government wants to promote its popularity by advocating Pakistani nationalism by using war language. Anti-India feelings are the main way the religious fundamentalists build their support. The Pakistan state is heavily linked with religion and there is no attempt to separate the two.

The government is at its lowest ebb of popularity. A public survey put the PPP government's popularity at only 21 per cent on December 20, 2008. Even in Sindh province, where the PPP had a historic landslide victory in the February general election this year, it has met with growing anger on several issues, particularly against the proposed privatisation of gas fields.

There are daily air strikes by the US imperialism and dozens are being killed inside Pakistan, an act of direct aggression not seen in earlier periods. "We have not given permission or entered an accord with Americans to attack", said Pakistan's foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi, clarifying the government's position, contradicting a report by the Washington Post, which claimed the PPP government has made such a deal with Washington.

"You can attack wherever you like, we will protest in strong words, do not take it literally and keep doing your work to eliminate the terrorists in Pakistan's tribal areas" is what seems to have been accepted secretly by the Zardari PPP government. The PPP government has also accepted publicly that it cannot do anything when the US attacks. "We cannot fight the Americans" is the response of Zardari.

The foreign secretary, Kamaran Rasul, was immediately removed in November from his post by the government after he told a parliamentary committee that Washington does not inform the Pakistan government beforehand the nature of the attacks, they tell it the details minutes after carrying out the attacks.

Along with the US air and ground strikes, Pakistani military operations ordered by the PPP government are taking place in several parts of Pakistan against the growing tide of religious fundamentalists. It claims to kill Taliban and anti-state elements every day. The war language is used by the government in private and public print and electronic media. Despite all that, the religious fundamentalists continue to retaliate with suicide attacks, burning of public property, particularly girl's schools, and the bombing of civilian, police and military areas.

It is a bullfight between the two mad groups. Every grubby and brutal tactic is justified in this war of the lords. However, the masses are paying the price. There are daily civilian casualties in the attacks from the both sides.

There is massive internal and external displacement, and there is no one to help these "immigrants" in their own country. Minus-degree winter temperatures in some areas have resulted in even more hardship for those in temporary tents. No one can win this war by military means. Both sides are losing the war, with the masses losing their lives with no end in sight in the near future.

## Rising debts; neoliberal agenda

The International Monetary Funds (IMF) agreed on November 16 to "bail out" Pakistan with a \$7.9 billion loan, with a nearly 5 per cent interest rate. The normal interest rate for many other countries has been less than 3 per cent. The loan deal has been hailed by Shoukat Tareen, the unelected federal finance adviser, as a result of the Pakistan governments brilliant negotiating skills. The full deal has yet to be made public.

However, many economists in Pakistan believe that will be littered with strict conditions not seen any earlier deals made by previous governments with the IMF. It is estimated that more than 100 billion rupees (US\$1.2 billion) new taxes will be imposed on the people to meet the criteria of this debt deal. With the present loan, Pakistan's total foreign debt has risen to \$53 billion. The IMF conditions also include agricultural taxes and corporate farming that will accelerate rising food prices in Pakistan.

The PPP government has continued with the same neoliberal agenda as was carried out by General Musharaf during his nine-year rule. One of the first measures it took to "cure the ailing economy" was to increase the general sales tax from 15 per cent to 16 per cent. Then, it went on to attack state subsidies that were only 7.9 per cent of the total budget. They did not dare to address the most unwanted expenditure, defence spending and repayment of the foreign debts, which account for nearly 50 per cent of the total budget.

The withdrawal of state subsidies from oil and electricity were felt very badly by the masses all over Pakistan. That was the turning point in decreasing popularity of the PPP government. Electricity prices were increased by 70 per cent. The spontaneous mass reaction of burning electricity bills and a non-payment campaign led the to the PPP government's first public defeat. It had to announce the withdrawal of the increases and later a 13 per cent decrease in the increased prices was announced.

Another major defeat of the PPP government during November was on the question of privatisation. The PPP government announcement of the sale of Qadirpur Gas Fields in Sindh on November 7 was immediately opposed by the gas workers' union and later they were joined by all the major political parties. The mass reaction in Sindh terrified the PPP government and it had to announce the postponement of the sell-off. It has not been abandoned but the government is waiting for a better time.

The PPP will now play the same dirty game that it did with the lawyers' movement. Offering "jobs for the boys" will be the main pillar of its strategy to go ahead with the privatisation. Most of the PPP-affiliated lawyers who were in the forefront of the lawyers' movement are now judges of the higher and lower courts, attorney generals or are representing state-owned companies. That was the price of these PPP lawyers and the PPP government paid it happily. Although this has resulted in PPP support being almost totally wiped out among the 80,000 lawyers &mdash; the PPP had nearly 80 per cent support in March 2007 &mdash; when the issue of the sacking of top judge Iftikhar Choudry came up.

The PPP government has a plan for wholesale privatisation of the major institutions of the state. However, the present setback will lead to more difficulties. The PPP government cannot repeat the hey day of foreign investment the Musharaf dictatorship had for a brief period. The international economic crisis, the image of Pakistan as a place

of regular suicide attacks, the continued imperialist aggression and bombing there, the PPP government's image as a weak government, the ever-declining industrial infrastructure and the rising opposition and unpopularity of the government will all lead to buyers of these institutions staying away.

## Losing support all over

During the last eight months the PPP government has been seen to deceive, mislead, swindle, fiddle, double-cross and rip-off individuals, groups and fellow political parties without any shame. The PPP promised to restore the top judges sacked by Musharaf within 24 hours of general's departure, but it did not. It promised to decrease local oil prices as they reduced in the international market, but it did not do so according in same proportion. It promised to protect the sovereignty of Pakistan and agreed not to allow the US to attack inside Pakistan directly, but it just caved in to Washington. The PPP's coalition partners promised to bring peace in North West Frontier Province, but failed to do so, and instead war is knocking on every door in the province. The PPP promised during the election campaign to provide "bread, clothes and homes", instead the prices of all these have risen beyond the reach of working people.

PPP government ministers now say that all this cannot be done overnight. However, when all the trends are going in opposite direction of your promises, it is hard to believe that it will be ok in future, if we suffer now.

The message of the PPP government is very clear, "suffer now to be in better position in future". That advice is not understood by overwhelmingly majority of Pakistanis. This is justification used by all capitalist politicians all over the world to persuade the masses.

The continues price hikes of almost every consumer good for the last eight months is mainly due to the policies adopted by the PPP government, following the footsteps of the Musharaf dictatorship. It is going on the blind road of market-guided policies. It is withdrawing subsidies. It is privatising or planning to privatize the main pillars of the economy. All that means, earning a good deal of hate from all quarters. It is losing support at a fast speed. Asif Zardari, the president of Pakistan, has become very unpopular. The PPP government has lost almost all support from the lawyers. Everyone speaks of the corruption that is going on. An army of 55 federal ministers have been inducted at a time when they are crying about an economic crisis.

All friends and contacts of Asif Zardari who helped him during his imprisonment of eight years under the Nawaz Sharif and Musharaf regimes have been inducted into key posts. The law minister's only qualification is that he was Zardari's lawyer at the time of his imprisonment. The interior adviser cum minister, with his multi-millions, was appointed because he offered his great hospitality to Zardari during his exile period in London. A police officer who offered Zardari an air-conditioned car during his travels from one prison to another is being promoted to deputy inspector-general of police out of turn.

## Growing contradiction with PMLN

The growing unpopularity of the PPP government has also increased tensions with the Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN). The PMLN does not want to share the unpopular feelings of the masses by being totally supportive of the PPP government. The PMLN's economic and political policies are no better than the PPP's. Both parties are right-wing parties. Both believe in working hand-in-hand with US imperialism. Both are implementing the neoliberal agenda.

The small difference is that of the PMLN is consciously trying to clean up the mess that it has created for itself by siding with every military ruler in the past. One must not be fooled by the PMLN promise to bring back the independent judiciary by restoring the judges. It might do that if it comes to power again. However, its overall policies will be anti-worker and anti-people in essence and for the promotion of the rich class. It is a party of the rich, by the rich, for the rich. It is a class party of the capitalists and feudal landlords. It will exploit the working class as the PPP government is doing at this time.

## Future of the PPP government

The PPP government is weak, frail, fragile and in poor health. There are already reports of contradictions between the president and prime minister. Any action by one of them against the other will be the starting point for this government to end. Even if they do not do so, still the PPP government cannot complete its full five-year term. The reason is its unpopularity among the masses. It is now more and more dependent on repression and more in favour of continues army action in the NWFP and tribal areas. It is silent on the daily US military attacks inside Pakistan. It objects to Indian aircraft entering a few kilometres into Pakistan's airspace but seems happy to allow US war planes to make inroads of a few hundred kilometres.

PPP president Zardari is already the most unpopular elected president in Pakistan's history. He has no credibility. Billboards across Pakistan are beleaguered with pictures of Zardari and company, and local leaderships are thanking him for providing ministries. Benazir Bhutto's murderers are still free after nine months of PPP rule and there is no attempt by the PPP government to launch an investigation into the murder. It is using the issue of a possible investigation by the UN as an excuse to avoid the question.

We must build an alternative to the politics of the rich. The Labour Party Pakistan is attempting to do so. We need your support and cooperation. Please do not sit on sidelines. Take sides in favour of working-class politics.