

Musharraf regime on the rocks

BY CATHY NUGENT

GENERAL Pervez Musharraf's eight year grip on political power in Pakistan looks increasingly precarious. His desperation showed in his response to the return from exile of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif this month. Sharif returned to challenge Musharraf and his cronies in elections due in November. He was deported hours after his plane touched down in Islamabad.

Musharraf's term as President is set to legally expire before the November elections, but Musharraf wants to extend his term — by some ruse or other. The current Parliament, which in which his supporters have a majority, may give him an extension. A new Parliament — if it is elected by free and fair elections — will go against Musharraf.

Why did Musharraf bother getting rid of Sharif? After all he could always ensure the elections are rigged so that his PML-Q party dominates again.

Musharraf (and his friends in the west) are probably anxious not to create another source of opposition to the Pakistani government. Sharif's presence in the country would have done that. The US seem desperate to keep



Pervez Musharraf

Musharraf in place, in some capacity. They say he is all that stands in the way of extreme Islamists getting their hands on Pakistan's nuclear weapons.

Right now Musharraf is under attack and threat from many sides. This is just the results and consequences of his record in power.

In July Musharraf ordered the capture of the hardline Red Mosque and its religious school in Islamabad. Over 100 people were killed. This has prompted a surge in suicide bombings and other attacks by Pakistan's various jihadist organisations.

After the storming of the Red Mosque the army deployed more troops to the North Waziristan region of the country, where pro-Taliban jihadists have been operating, in anticipation of further fighting. The army's increased presence prompted... further fighting.

Last March Musharraf suspended the country's chief justice. This sparked a countrywide protest by lawyers, civil society groups and opposition parties until the Supreme Court restored Justice Chaudhry. (The Supreme Court also sanctioned Sharif's return from Saudi Arabia where he had been exiled under a deal which saw a life imprisonment sentence quashed).

The background to the chief justice suspension was the General's attempt to find an illegal pretext on which to carry on as both presi-

dent and army chief. Sharif's deportation will almost certainly spark a similar protest.

Pakistani media can be very stropic. If Musharraf were to rig the elections, a huge media outcry would result.

Beyond the major parties there is a new grouping of populist and quasi-Islamist smaller parties called the APDM mounting street protests and court challenges.

Musharraf has few options. One of these is to share power with the Pakistani People's Party — a course that he has been pursuing ambivalently over the last year, conducting negotiations with the PPP's main leader, Benazir Bhutto, in her Dubai exile. Her publicists have been working full time to feed the media with stories of Bhutto as both a force to be reckoned with and a champion of democracy. That would be why she's prepared to do deals with the General.

And the deal is? The PPP would be prepared to give Musharraf some parliamentary exemption to his end of tenure, if he gives up his army post and reduces his presidential powers. The PPP is certainly a force to be reckoned with, but whether its popularity could survive the stink of such a deal is another matter.

WOZA defiant against threats

At four in the morning on 24 August, Zimbabwean police carried out a raid on the homes of Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) members in Bulawayo, taking six women and a one year-old baby into custody. This came just a week after WOZA's "Sheroes" gathering, a conference held in secret in the face of Mugabe's police state, under the tagline "beaten, jailed but still determined to be free".

Smashing down gates and doors, the police seized the feminist activists from their homes and drove them to the bush around Khami Ruins, some 40 km outside Bulawayo, telling them that it was the last time they would be seen alive. Three were taken to a cliff top and told they would be thrown into the river below unless they informed on their comrades and passed on information about the WOZA organisation. Fortunately, as some tourists passed by the police became alarmed at a potential publicity disaster and released the women later that day.

But the Zimbabwean regime maintains a shameless campaign of repression against WOZA, and indeed the labour movement. The country's ever-deepening economic chaos, discontent among Mugabe's own party and a strike wave earlier this year have given the ageing tyrant reason to worry, leading to mass arrests of his opponents.

The week after the raid, 26 WOZA activists on trial in Gweru were finally removed off remand, some five months after being arrested for proclaiming WOZA's "people's charter". That was their fourth court appearance, the costs of which had forced some of the activists to sell their livestock, ruining their livelihoods. In Bulawayo four WOZA members are still going through the courts for their part in a housing demonstration last October.

In the face of Mugabe's repression, the need to solidarise with the labour movement and women's organisations struggling for democracy is clear.

Iranian government cracks down

BY JACK STAUNTON

THIS summer the Iranian regime carried out a fresh wave of torture and executions, keeping up its record of systematic human rights abuses, including killings of children, political dissidents, gay people and women. Some 50 people were killed by the Islamic Republic in August — a sharp increase even since 2006, when "only" 177 people were executed across the whole year.

Iran's tyrants have the ignominious honour of ranking as the world's second most prolific state killer, trailing only China in the number of executions. The regime's tally includes the hangings and stonings of those who have committed such "crimes" as "sodomy" and "apostasy". Each year the theocracy puts to death three times more people than even the United States of America.

The recent ramping-up in capital punishment has accompanied a government tightening-up, asserting its control over society with a crack-down on breaches of "Islamic law". The increasingly unpopular President Ahmedinejad and his administration not only mete out the death penalty to punish raped girls accused of "adultery" and boys who have gay sex, but as part of a campaign to maintain order in the face of a burgeoning workers' and women's movement which threatens the very basis of the theocratic order.

There are currently no fewer than 416 political dissidents in Iran's jail cells. Those whom the regime will allow to languish in prison, rather than killing them, are still subject to horrific human rights abuses. On 5 August, 11 leaders of the National Union of Unemployed and Dismissed Workers were condemned to 91 days in prison and ten lashes of the whip for their role in organising this year's May Day demonstrations.

In the face of this onslaught, activists have begun campaigns to denounce the regime. On 25 August, the International Committee against Executions published a letter from inside Iran's prisons, with 26 political prisoners and people on death row calling for worldwide demonstrations to bring international attention to the Islamic Republic's human rights abuses and to try and stop the executions from taking place. Clearly, this struggle against the death penalty in Iran must be a key part of the fight for basic

human freedoms and democracy in the face of the despotic regime and US sabre-rattling.

Iranian lesbian under deportation threat

An international campaign to defend Iranian asylum-seeker Pegah Emambakhsh from deportation has succeeded in delaying her return to Iran. Arrested in Sheffield on 13 August, Pegah was imprisoned in Yarlswood detention centre and was due to be expelled from the UK two weeks later — because she is a lesbian and because of her past life in Iran, she risked being put to death upon her return.

But a global campaign and the intervention of Sheffield Central MP Richard Caborn, succeeded in winning an eleventh-hour reprieve for Pegah. She is still detained at Yarlswood,

from where she sent a message to her supporters on 8 September

"I am having a difficult time right now, with no assurances for the future and with a lot of pain in my soul. I cannot deny that I am still very frightened, and the separation from my beloved children hurts so much that at times it seems unbearable. You don't know how much of a comfort it is to me to know that you are out there. You don't even know me, yet you are working for my cause, sticking your necks out and fighting for me, you write to me and send me wonderful flowers. I wasn't expecting anything like this."

Despite the campaign against deporting Pegah back to Iran, including an online petition signed by more than 10,000 people, her stay in the UK and her life are still in grave danger. Visit www.annesdoor.com for more information about the campaign.

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