

Pakistan's democracy movement defies repression

Monday 2 April 2007, by [McILROY Jim](#) (Date first published: 29 March 2007).

Lahore,

Around 5000 lawyers protesting on March 21 vowed not to rest until they succeed in removing General Pervez Musharraf from office, forcing the withdrawal of the reference against Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry and gaining assurance of a full independent judiciary capable of protecting the constitution. They called for the establishment of a truly democratic government through free and fair elections. The dispute was sparked on March 9 when Musharraf suspended Chaudhry.

The lawyers will remain undaunted against the "black acts" of the rulers, while waging a struggle for the rule of law and for the supremacy of the constitution, Ahsan Bhoon, president of the Lahore High Court Bar Association, told the "black coats" after their lunchtime march through the city mall.

"No more victimisation by the government will be tolerated as the whole nation has been awakened", Bhoon told the rally, according to the March 22 English-language daily The Nation. The lawyers had expressed their determination during a sit-in, after marching through the streets chanting anti-government slogans.

The authorities largely held back from attacking the protesters this time, following widespread criticism of police repression of a March 17 demonstration. On that occasion, police fired tear gas shells into the crowd and used batons to beat lawyers and journalists.

Lawyers have continued to stage walk-outs from their court duties, and members of the Save the Judiciary Committee have carried out a hunger strike in support of their demands, as the campaign escalates in cities across Pakistan.

In Islamabad, lawyers marched to the Supreme Court building to protest the charges against Chaudhry, despite police barricading streets all around the court precinct. In Quetta, police fired tear gas and baton-charged the protesters, injuring several lawyers. Some of the lawyers burned their black coats in protest.

Political parties, including members of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Muslim-based Muttahida Majlesi Amal (MMA), held separate rallies in support of the demands of the lawyers. Police had arrested more than 250 opposition party activists in early morning raids in Islamabad and Rawalpindi to prevent them joining the protests in front of the the Supreme Court in the capital.

In a joint statement on March 21, United Nations representatives Leandro Despouy and Hina Jilani called on Pakistani authorities to remedy the situation, according to a report in the March 22 edition of The Nation. "Demonstrators, including lawyers, journalists, political activists and civil society actors, have taken to the streets since March 12 to protest against this presidential decision, which is broadly seen as an attack against the independence of the judiciary.

"Law enforcement authorities, in some instances, have used force in an excessive manner against peaceful demonstrators, and have arrested several of them. Also, journalists were physically

hindered from reporting on the events.”

Further rallies were held in cities all around Pakistan on March 26, calling for the reinstatement of Chaudry and the removal of Musharraf from office. The major rallies, organised by the ARD, also demanded that an independent Chief Election Commission be constituted, under the supervision of an impartial person, to hold general elections under a caretaker government.

The leaders of the ARD vowed to fight for the independence of the judiciary, the restoration of real democracy and the supremacy of parliament. The main parties involved in the ARD are the PPP and the Muslim League-Nawaz League. Other opposition parties including the MMA supported the rallies.

In Lahore, some 5000 people marched in separate contingents to the High Court building, despite police hindrance and harassment. Carrying party flags and chanting anti-Musharraf slogans, they converged on the court, where they were greeted by a large number of black-coated advocates (lawyers).

The Labour Party Pakistan (LPP) held separate marches in 11 cities, which linked up with the main rallies in the major centres. In both Lahore and Karachi, several hundred LPP supporters staged militant protest marches, carrying red flags, in the face of police harassment. Karachi marchers carried portraits of Latin American revolutionary leader Che Guevara, and demanded an end to the present “rotten system”, according to the March 27 Nation.

All the rallies proceeded despite severe state repression, including mass arrests of party workers on the day before the protests. Punjab PPP general secretary Chaudry Ghulam Abbas told the March 27 Daily Dawn newspaper that police had arrested about 1000 workers from all around the state of Punjab, although almost all of them had been released by the evening of March 26.

In Peshawar, leaders of various secular and religious parties, speaking at a joint public meeting on March 26, stressed the need for launching a “decisive and concerted movement against military rulers and their hand-picked corrupt politicians to rid the country of lawlessness, corruption and poverty”, according to the March 27 Daily Dawn.

The next major mobilisation is scheduled for April 3, to coincide with Chaudhry’s appearance before the High Court to answer trumped-up charges of misuse of office resources.

It is widely viewed that Chaudhry is really being charged for standing up to the Musharraf regime, threatening to challenge any attempt to hold fraudulent elections later this year, and for foreshadowing an exposure of the government’s corrupt privatisation of the Habib Bank.

P.S.

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