

Bhutto Urges Protest Against Musharraf

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ISLAMABAD, [Pakistan](#), Nov. 7 -- Following four days of relatively tepid statements, former prime minister [Benazir Bhutto](#) on Wednesday issued a rousing call to action against President [Pervez Musharraf](#)'s declaration of emergency rule, setting up a possible direct confrontation between two titans of Pakistani power.

Bhutto, whose legions of rank-and-file supporters have been conspicuously absent from anti-Musharraf demonstrations this week, urged her backers to attend a major rally Friday in [Rawalpindi](#), the headquarters of the army, which Musharraf heads. After that, she said, opponents of emergency rule would begin "a long march" from the eastern city of [Lahore](#) to the capital, [Islamabad](#). The 250-mile journey will take them through the heart of [Punjab](#), [Pakistan](#)'s largest and most politically influential province.

The government has officially banned protests, and the mayor of Rawalpindi said Bhutto's demonstration would be suppressed. But Bhutto said she would go ahead with the rally. "I request my brothers and sisters to reach Rawalpindi at all costs," she said at a news conference Wednesday afternoon. The Pakistani people, she said, are "under attack" and need to respond with action.

After she spoke, hundreds of boisterous Bhutto supporters attempted to march to the Parliament building in Islamabad but were beaten back by riot police wielding sticks and firing tear gas in a clash that might preview what lies ahead.

Bhutto's declaration could mark a significant escalation in the showdown between Musharraf and the country's lawyers, human rights activists and political opponents who, since Saturday, have condemned the general for instituting de facto martial law.

Protests thus far have been lightly attended and quickly put down. But Bhutto has an unrivaled capacity to draw crowds in Pakistan; just last month, she brought hundreds of thousands of cheering supporters to the streets of [Karachi](#) for her homecoming following eight years of exile.

Large protests, especially ones that elicit violent responses from security forces, could be destabilizing for Musharraf.

"Musharraf would not survive a half a million people on the streets," said Ejaz Haider, a columnist with the English-language Daily Times in Lahore. "That would be the end."

Bhutto's call to action could force a split in the army's chain of command if Musharraf orders the demonstrations to be put down violently.

"I have a feeling that the army can't go along with it if he tries to suppress the protests," said retired Gen. Talat Masood.

Before Bhutto's return, she and Musharraf had engaged in months-long power-sharing talks. Many Pakistani political analysts had speculated that even after the emergency declaration, she would not directly challenge Musharraf for fear of jeopardizing those negotiations.

But Wednesday, Bhutto gave Musharraf a 48-hour ultimatum to meet her demands or confront her in the streets.

"General Musharraf can open the door for negotiations only if he revives the constitution, retires as chief of army staff and sticks to the schedule of holding elections," she said, adding, "The ball is now in the government's court."

Bhutto's demands dovetail with calls from the United States and other Western countries for Musharraf to schedule elections for January, take off his uniform as promised and end emergency rule.

Bhutto met Wednesday with the U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, Anne W. Patterson. A Western diplomat pointed out that Bhutto and the West appear to be on the same page. "Everyone's very disturbed and concerned and pushing in every possible way to get this emergency lifted," the diplomat said on the condition of anonymity.

Asked how long Musharraf would have to make those moves, [White House](#) spokesman [Gordon Johndroe](#) said, "This is not a never-ending process. They need to release the people that they've arrested, they need to stop beating people in the streets, they need to restore press freedom and they need to get back on the path to democracy soon -- now."

The Pakistani government has sent mixed signals about how long it intends to maintain emergency rule. Some top officials have said it will end in a few weeks, while others have suggested it could go on much longer. Musharraf has not revealed his plans.

Notably, Bhutto did not focus on the restoration of the Supreme Court judges Musharraf fired Saturday. The judges had been expected to rule Musharraf ineligible for another term as president. Bhutto also did not call for Musharraf's resignation as president, as other opposition leaders have, repeatedly and loudly.

Still, her statements Wednesday were considered unusually strong and reflected her realization that "if she stays quiet, she loses credibility," according to political analyst Hasan Askari Rizvi. "It seems that she is now changing her policy."

Musharraf was already deeply unpopular in Pakistan before he suspended the constitution. His moves Saturday seem to have further eroded support for him and his associates.

Nevertheless, organized opposition has been minimal. To keep it that way, the government has initiated a massive crackdown, arresting thousands of political prisoners and blacking out independent television stations for five straight days.

All week, lawyers have come out in force against Musharraf. But their numbers nationwide are comparatively small. At protests in Islamabad, a couple of hundred lawyers have demonstrated each day, while a much larger number of shopkeepers and other working-class Pakistanis have looked on but not joined in.

One said he was too afraid.

"What is going on is all wrong. It is illegal and unconstitutional. So my heart is with the protesters," said Mohammed Javed, 40, who runs a small storefront advertising typing and printing services. "But if I protest, my family will be in jeopardy."

Bhutto, though, has widespread appeal in Pakistan and boasts devoted backers from all rungs of society.

Analyst Ayaz Amir said Bhutto's move Wednesday could have significant implications for Musharraf's ability to stay in power. "If all the opposition politicians get together, my feeling is it will not be an easy ride for the general," he said.

Amir said that while the United States had been trying to forge an accord between Musharraf and Bhutto earlier in the year, her vow to stand against him and her echoing of U.S. demands suggests that Washington "may be coming around to a different point of view. Whether they have decided to ditch Musharraf entirely, I don't know."

Musharraf, Amir noted, has not done anything since he declared the emergency on Saturday to tackle the issue in Pakistan that the United States cares about most: counterterrorism. Indeed, the Pakistani army continues to lose ground to insurgents in the scenic Swat Valley, and on Sunday, Pakistan released about 30 [Taliban](#) fighters in a prisoner exchange in the tribal area of [South Waziristan](#).

Any rally led by Bhutto will be risky for its participants. Not only has the government vowed to put down all rallies but insurgents have promised to attack the former prime minister when she makes her next public appearance. When she returned to Karachi last month, 140 people were killed in a failed assassination attempt against her. Since then, Bhutto has not held any major public demonstrations.

Correspondent Emily Wax in Lahore and special correspondent Shahzad Khurram in Islamabad contributed to this report.