

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Public Statement

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### **Pakistan: Concern over threat to freedom of expression ahead of presidential election**

Amnesty International is concerned about reports of repeated use of excessive force by police during the last four weeks at peaceful demonstrations by the political activists and lawyers who are opposed to General Musharraf. Police have also used anti-terrorism and security laws to curb freedom of expression and association. Criminal cases have been registered against the political activist and lawyers who have protested against the candidature of General Musharraf for the presidential elections scheduled to be held on 6 October.

On 29 September, police and other law enforcement personnel many of whom were dressed in plain clothes fired tear gas, used batons and pelted bricks at peaceful demonstrators, injuring demonstrators and journalists covering the demonstration... According to hospital officials, more than eighty injured people were treated, many suffering head wounds. The injured included more than twenty journalists and many lawyers, including two members of parliament.

Journalists attempting to cover the demonstration were forcefully prevented from approaching the demonstration by police and more than two dozen were severely beaten.

Amnesty International calls on the Government of Pakistan to respect Pakistan's own constitutional safeguards and international human rights standards as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to guarantee the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association of its people.

Amnesty International calls upon the Government of Pakistan:

- to respect and protect freedom of expression and association in the run up to the presidential elections and beyond;
- to ensure that people engaged in peaceful protests are able to do so with out being subjected to excessive use of force or other unreasonable restriction on their ability to exercise their freedom of expression and association; and
- to release those arrested during peaceful protests unless they are charged with a recognisably criminal offence.

#### **Background**

Since 20 September, when the Chief Election Commissioner announced the date for the next Presidential elections, opposition political parties and the lawyers have been protesting against General Musharraf, asserting that his candidacy is unconstitutional. On September 22 on the orders of the Supreme Court, the government released more

than 200 political leaders and activists, however many of those released continue to face criminal charges filed against them under laws banning demonstrations.

On 1 October, the Supreme Court found the Islamabad Police Chief responsible for ordering disproportionate force against lawyers and journalists in the demonstrations on September 29, and ordered his immediate suspension.

On 28 September, the Supreme Court dismissed six constitutional petitions challenging General Musharraf's continuity as army chief, and his eligibility to contest presidential elections while continuing to be the serving head of the army. In protest against the approval by the Chief Election commissioner of the General Musharraf's nomination papers for candidature in the Presidential election members of the All Parties Democratic Movement (a major alliance of opposition political parties) resigned from the elected assemblies, including 85 members of the national assembly. Two other candidates for the Presidential election have also filed petitions in the Supreme Court, challenging General Musharraf's eligibility to contest the election.

On 10 September, opposition leader and twice prime minister Mian Nawaz Sharif - who returned to the country after seven years in exile - was forcefully deported to Saudi Arabia within hours of arrival at Islamabad. On 23 August the Supreme Court had declared that Mian Nawaz Sharif had the inalienable right to return to his home country, and directed the government to not impede this. Despite the orders of the Supreme Court, the former prime minister was deported.