

US signals readiness to work with coup leaders in Pakistan

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14 October 1999

Pakistan's military, which ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif Tuesday evening, appears to have quickly consolidated its control over the country without meeting resistance. But the coup leaders, more than 36 hours after seizing power, have yet to announce how the country of 140 million is to be governed.

Joint Chiefs of Staff and Army Chief Pervez Musharraf gave a brief televised address early Wednesday morning in which he claimed the breakdown of the country's institutions and the collapse of its economy had forced the armed forces to intervene and reestablish order. Musharraf promised "a lengthy policy statement ... very soon," but no further statement was forthcoming on Wednesday.

Late in the day Musharraf met with Pakistani President Mohammad Rafiq Tarar. Sharif was dismissed as prime minister by presidential decree in 1993. On regaining the prime ministership in February 1997, however, he secured an amendment to the constitution abolishing the president's emergency powers.

The delay in announcing a replacement for Sharif's Muslim League government suggests that the military is seeking the means to imbue its overthrow of an elected government with some form of constitutional legitimacy. Unlike the military takeovers of 1958 and 1977, martial law has not been declared, nor has parliament been disbanded.

Giving the new government a constitutional facade would go a long way towards answering the concerns of the United States, upon which Pakistan has long been dependent for military, diplomatic and economic support. Washington's response to the events in Pakistan has been remarkably subdued, even though only three weeks ago the State Department issued a strongly worded statement opposing any attempt to

remove Sharif by "extra-constitutional means." Initially, State Department officials refrained from calling Sharif's ouster a coup.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and other US spokesmen have not called for Sharif to be returned to power, nor have they demanded an immediate return to parliamentary rule. Rather, in the words of White House spokesman Joe Lockhart, the US is pressing for "the earliest possible restoration of civilian rule."

This is widely interpreted as a signal that the US is ready to negotiate its support for an interim military regime and, in the event it gets concessions on Pakistani support for Afghanistan's Taliban regime and on nuclear proliferation, will rein in allies like Canada that have been calling for new sanctions to be imposed on Pakistan.

Many of Pakistan's opposition parties, including the largest, Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party, have indicated their readiness to support an interim military-led government that would hold power for a few months, pending the organization of new elections.

"We expect them to return to democratic rule and we want to hear what their plans are," said Albright in announcing that the US was sending its ambassador, who had been out of Pakistan at the time of the coup, back to Islamabad.

US and other Western sources have sought to deny claims that Musharraf is a staunch Islamic fundamentalist. Declared one news report, "Although seen as a hawk towards India, the career soldier Musharraf is considered a moderate at home, opposed to growing Islamic fundamentalist influence and in favor of economic development."

Benazir Bhutto has also joined in casting Musharraf in a rosy light, although he was reputedly the mastermind of the recent Pakistani incursion into

Kashmir that brought the Indian subcontinent to the brink of all-out war.

Pakistan's military has given indications that it wants an interim government to last considerably longer than the three months mentioned by Bhutto and other politicians. According to one Pakistani news report, the military is trying to form a government of senior statesmen and technocrats that will be able to take decisive steps to deal with the country's economic crisis and the centrifugal antagonisms within the Pakistani federal state. Says the *Star*, "Reliable sources said that lists are being prepared to change the entire set-up of the country, which includes all the major financial institutions."

According to Pakistani armed forces spokesman Brigadier Rashid Querishi, this week's coup was a "spontaneous" rebellion of the ranks, triggered by Sharif's attempt to replace Musharraf as chief of the army. But last week this same Brigadier Querishi told the *Washington Post*, "The only way Pakistan can survive and progress is if all elements of power are one in thought and action. The army is a stabilizing influence, and there is a collective feeling that we must help."

In his address to the nation, Musharraf painted a picture of a country in ruin. "Not only have all the institutions been played around with and systematically destroyed, the economy too is in a state of collapse." He accused Sharif of carrying out "self-serving policies" that "have rocked the very foundation of the Federation of Pakistan," including interference "with the armed forces, the last remaining viable institution" upholding Pakistan's "stability, unity and integrity."

The indifference, if not support, of broad sections of the Pakistani population for Sharif's ouster underscores the widespread perception in the country that his corrupt, authoritarian regime led Pakistan to disaster. Sharif implemented IMF austerity programs, while fanning religious fundamentalism and trying to monopolize all power in the hands of his family and a small clique of Punjabi businessmen and politicians.

However the military, which has ruled Pakistan for 25 of its 52 years of independence, bears even greater responsibility for the plight of the Pakistani masses. Not only has it squandered vast amounts of money on weaponry and military adventures, it serves as the principal guardian of an economic order in which the

Sharifs and the Bhuttos monopolize Pakistan's wealth, while the vast majority live in desperate poverty.

See Also:

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[13 October 1999]



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