

Court slows Bush grab for power: America at the knife-edge

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The extraordinary events of November 17, 2000 are among the most dramatic in recent American political history. A Florida county judge issued a ruling at 10 a.m., which cleared the way to the Bush campaign to hijack the presidential election. Six hours later the Florida Supreme Court intervened to overturn this action and bar Secretary of State Katherine Harris, a Republican and co-chairman of the Florida Bush campaign, from certifying the results of the November 7 vote.

The seven justices of the state's highest court ruled unanimously that Harris could not go ahead with the certification of a Bush victory, which had been planned for Saturday afternoon after Florida's 67 counties completed counting of absentee ballots mailed from overseas. They authorized both the counting of absentee ballots and the hand recounts in several counties to continue, and set a hearing for 2 p.m. Monday to hear arguments on whether the hand recounts should be included in the state's final vote totals.

Harris had sought to lock in Bush's narrow 300-vote lead in Florida by announcing that she would not accept any new totals based on the hand recounts. Her decision, announced unilaterally on Wednesday evening, would exclude the ballots of tens of thousands of Floridians which were not recorded in the original machine count November 7-8 and a subsequent machine recount. Local election officials in Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade counties have begun a painstaking examination of more than 1.5 million ballots, a process which could last until the middle of next week.

There were more setbacks for the Bush campaign during Friday. A local judge in Broward County denied a request for an injunction to halt the hand recount in that county, which includes Fort Lauderdale. Election officials in Miami-Dade, the state's most populous county, reversed themselves after the Supreme Court decision and decided to go ahead with a hand recount there. And late in the day, the federal 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta, Georgia denied a Republican lawsuit seeking to suppress the hand recount throughout the state.

The intervention of the courts is not simply the partisan response of Democratic judges, as the Bush campaign and the extreme right will undoubtedly claim. A majority of the seven state Supreme Court justices are conservative Democrats, with only one considered a liberal. Of the 12 federal Appeals Court justices who ruled unanimously against Bush, seven are Republicans, four of them appointed by Bush's father.

These judicial actions reveal the growing concern at the highest levels of the government and the American ruling class over the political implications of the pseudo-legal seizure of power that is being carried out in Florida. The right-wing forces which dominate the Bush campaign are on the brink of coming to power through brazenly antidemocratic and unpopular methods.

The state Supreme Court's intervention amounts to a postponement for three days of the extraordinary ruling issued Friday morning by Judge Terry Lewis of the Leon County Circuit Court, rubber-stamping Harris's decision to suppress the votes now being tallied in the hand recount. Only two days before, Lewis issued a ruling warning the Florida Secretary of State not to disregard the hand recounts arbitrarily or for political reasons. Harris then proceeded to do exactly that, announcing Wednesday night that she would accept no hand recounts whatsoever.

Whether his decision was based on cowardice, corruption or political sympathy with Bush, Judge Lewis astonished legal observers by effectively discarding his previous ruling and finding that Harris had the authority, as the state's highest election official, to declare the election for Bush, disregarding the hand recounts.

Lewis ignored flagrantly provocative conduct by the Secretary of State. Harris sought to obstruct the hand recount, issuing legal opinions to local election officials and seeking court orders to stop the counting altogether. Then she used these delays, caused in large part by her own interference, as the pretext for rejecting the results of the hand recount, claiming that Tuesday, November 14, represented an unalterable legal deadline for submitting

countywide vote totals.

Judge Lewis's decision set the stage for the completion of a political coup d'etat, in which the Florida state government—run by Governor Jeb Bush, brother of the presidential candidate—would hand over the state's 25 electoral votes and the presidency to the Republican campaign. The elevation of George W. Bush to the presidency would be accomplished through the open and unabashed suppression of thousands of votes cast for his Democratic opponent, especially by Jewish, black and immigrant voters. It would represent, on the part of an entire section of the ruling elite, the repudiation of elementary democratic norms.

As this political conflict intensifies, the long-term implications for the stability, even the survival of the entire bourgeois-democratic structure upon which the American ruling class has historically based itself are becoming unmistakable. There are signs of trepidation over the increasing recklessness of the political forces supporting the Bush campaign.

The installation of a president who failed to win the popular vote nationwide and won the Electoral College only by means of fraud and ballot-rigging would have a devastating impact on the legitimacy and popular support for the government and for the capitalist system as a whole.

As Gore's observer in Florida, Warren Christopher, said, in a somber warning to his class: "What we're talking about here is the presidency of the United States. We'd be making a very serious mistake, I think, if we permitted the desire for an early result to compromise our basic standards and principles."

The conflict over the presidential elections reveals the extent to which a very substantial section of the ruling class has broken with democratic methods. They view the traditional norms of American bourgeois democracy with contempt.

Increasingly frustrated by the popular resistance to right-wing social policies, these elements feel that there is no alternative but to move towards an authoritarian regime which will treat all opposition ruthlessly. They aim to go down a road without precedent in modern US history, one which leads ultimately to civil war.

The struggle over the outcome of the presidential election has brought to a head processes which have been developing within American society for the past 30 years. A series of political crises in the course of this period mark the decay of the old bourgeois-democratic framework.

• In 1973-74, the Watergate crisis was the outcome of the illegal and antidemocratic actions of President Richard Nixon in response to mass popular opposition to the Vietnam War.

• In 1985-86, the Iran-Contra affair revealed that behind the façade of the Reagan administration, right-wing military officers and intelligence officials had organized a secret government and were running an illegal war in Central America.

• In 1995-96, the Republican congressional leadership deliberately provoked the shutdown of the federal government, attempting to seize control of federal policy from the Clinton administration.

• In 1998-99, the impeachment and trial of President Clinton were the product of a behind-the-scenes conspiracy of Republican lawyers, judges and political operatives, aimed at overturning the result of two presidential elections.

• Now comes the attempt by the Bush campaign to bully their way into power, using the arbitrary actions of Florida state government officials, backed by a complacent and compromised media.

In the final analysis, the events in Florida reveal the abyss which has opened up over the past three decades in American society, with the development of levels of social inequality unprecedented in this century. An impassable gulf exists between the wealthy elite, which controls both big business parties and determines their policies, and the working people who are the vast majority of the American population.

These are dangerous times.

See Also:

On-the-spot report from Florida Ft. Lauderdale residents voice their opinions about the US election crisis
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