

Pakistan and Zimbabwe: a tale of two autocrats

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Following a meeting of its Ministerial Action Group in London on Saturday, the British Commonwealth lifted the suspension imposed on Pakistan following the country's 1999 military coup. Ignoring all evidence to the contrary, the Commonwealth declared that "progress [has been] made in restoring democracy and rebuilding democratic institutions in Pakistan".

The reality is, however, that General Pervez Musharraf's rule is just as autocratic as it was five years ago when he ousted the elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The real reason for Pakistan's readmission lies in the key support provided by the Musharraf regime for the Washington's so-called war on terror, in particular the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

According to various media reports, the Bush administration has been pressuring Commonwealth countries to readmit Pakistan. The *Guardian* reported that Bush's loyal allies—British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his Australian counterpart John Howard—have been engaged in an intense lobbying effort of the nine countries whose representatives participated in the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG).

London has been pushing the matter for months. Last November Foreign Minister Jack Straw met with his Pakistani counterpart and expressed his support for the country's return to the organisation. "Pakistan is an increasingly important partnership," he declared.

Significantly the Commonwealth decision came just days after US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Christine Rocca visited Islamabad to urge Musharraf to intensify military operations against anti-US insurgents on the Pakistan/Afghanistan border and to provide troops for Iraq.

Reentry into the Commonwealth is one of a series of financial and political bribes being used to encourage Islamabad to continue its support for the "war on terrorism" despite mounting domestic opposition. While membership in the Commonwealth—the countries of the former British empire—brings few tangible benefits, it assists in legitimising Musharraf's rule.

The Commonwealth decision was not based on any serious review of democratic rights in Pakistan. When Musharraf

ousted Sharif in 1999, he suspended the constitution, dissolved parliament and later installed himself as president. Since then he has instituted a number of political reforms; but these measures are largely superficial, and do not significantly alter the dictatorial nature of his regime. The parliament Musharraf has created is a politically neutered body, with no real power beyond that permitted by the president.

The elections in 2002 were a sham. Anyone without a university degree—98 percent of the population—was barred from standing. According to the official figures—inflated by ballot stuffing—only 41 percent of the electorate cast a vote. European Union observers accused the Pakistani military of "unjustified interference with electoral arrangements and democratic process" and declared that "the Pakistan authorities engaged in a course of action which resulted in serious flaws in the electoral process".

Although Musharraf has indicated that he will give up his position as head of the armed forces by the end of the year, as president he will remain chairman of the National Security Council—a body stacked with military chiefs. This position leaves Musharraf with dictatorial powers, including a virtual veto over government decisions, powers to appoint and dismiss top military and state officials, and the ability to dissolve parliament.

A number of human rights groups have criticised the regime. Earlier this year, the US-based Human Rights Watch noted that "a veneer of legality masks rampant human rights abuses in Pakistan. The most pressing human rights concerns in the country include harassment and intimidation of the media; a rise in sectarian violence; legal discrimination against and mistreatment of women and religious minorities; torture and mistreatment of political opponents; and lack of due process in the conduct of the 'war on terror' in collaboration with the United States."

Musharraf continues to block the return of exiled prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. On May 11 he deported Shahbaz Sharif, the brother of Nawaz and president of the Pakistan Muslim League-N, to Saudi Arabia. Last month another opposition figure, Makhdoom Javed Hashmi was handed a 23-year jail term on bogus charges of sedition.

Like the Commonwealth, the Bush administration turns a

blind eye to Musharraf's continuing abuse of democratic rights in recognition of services rendered. Prior to September 11 2001, Pakistan had been one of the few countries that officially recognised the Taliban regime. Its military and logistical support was critical to the Taliban's rule. But faced with the prospect of becoming a target for US hostility, Musharraf made an abrupt about-face and backed the toppling of his former ally in Kabul.

During the US bombing campaign, Musharraf permitted the US military to use Pakistani military bases and granted access to Pakistani air space. Musharraf has also quietly allowed US forces, as well as FBI and CIA agents, to operate within the country in search of alleged Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters. Hundreds of alleged terrorists have been arrested in Pakistan by local security forces working closely with US agents.

The Pakistani autocrat also acquiesced to US demands for a military crackdown on the tribal areas around the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The US alleges that these remote regions are being used as hideouts by Taliban and Al Qaeda figures. In March approximately 70,000 Pakistani troops launched an offensive in these border regions, amid claims by Musharraf that his forces had surrounded a leading Al Qaeda suspect.

So obvious was the payoff to Pakistan that Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon felt the need to clumsily deny that politics or the US had played a role in the decision. "Every minister here is well aware of what's happening in the world generally," he explained. "[B]ut all ministers here are very much aware that their role in CMAG is to make judgments on Pakistan in relation to its restoration of democracy—not its geo-strategic or political position."

The cynicism behind the decision to readmit Pakistan is even starker when considered against the treatment meted out to Zimbabwe. As it happens, both countries held elections in 2002 where there were allegations of widespread rigging. In the case of Pakistan, the vote was regarded as "a step towards democracy". In the case of Zimbabwe, however, it became the pretext for a renewed political offensive against President Robert Mugabe that resulted in the country's suspension from the Commonwealth.

Speaking on the outcome of the Zimbabwe's poll, Bush hypocritically declared: "We do not recognise the outcome of this election. We are dealing with our friends to figure out how to deal with this flawed election." The Blair and Howard governments similarly refused to recognise the legitimacy of the election, which saw the re-election of Mugabe.

Following the poll, Britain successfully pressed for Zimbabwe's suspension from the Commonwealth. As a concession to the opposition of African member states, a committee of three was established—Australia, South Africa and Nigeria—to review Zimbabwe's human rights record.

Australian Prime Minister Howard played a key role on behalf of the US and Britain. He overrode the attempts of the African nations for some form of conciliation with Mugabe,

called for tougher economic and diplomatic sanctions and succeeded in pressing for Zimbabwe's renewed suspension last December. As a result, Zimbabwe quit the Commonwealth altogether.

There is no doubt that Mugabe is an authoritarian ruler, but that was not the reason for ostracising Zimbabwe. Mugabe was previously a close ally of the US and Britain, valued for his role in maintaining stability and private property following the overthrow of Ian Smith's racist government in 1980. Then the major powers turned a blind eye to Mugabe's suppression of his political opponents in Matabeleland.

In the late 1990s, however, Zimbabwe was wracked by a deep economic and social crisis, exacerbated by the Structural Adjustment Programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As the economic situation worsened, the increasingly harsh IMF demands provoked opposition among the working class and rural poor. Mugabe sought to mobilise his rural support base by returning to his old anti-imperialist rhetoric, and authorising a chaotic takeover of white-owned farmlands.

The moves sparked ferocious denunciations from London. Not only were British economic interests in Zimbabwe threatened but Mugabe's empty bluster threatened to trigger opposition elsewhere to the increasingly intrusive activities of Britain, the US and other major powers in Africa.

The two-faced treatment of Pakistan and Zimbabwe once again exposes the bankrupt claims of Blair, Bush and Howard to be agents of democracy around the world. All three joined in the illegal invasion of Iraq declaring that they would "liberate Iraq" and turn the country into a beacon for democracy throughout the Middle East.

What the readmission of Pakistan to the Commonwealth confirms is that whether a head of state is condemned as a "dictator" or hailed as a "democrat" is determined solely by their political and strategic value to the major powers—above all, to Washington.



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