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US President George W. Bush has again lavished praise on Pervez Musharraf, declaring himself “very pleased with” the “efforts” of Pakistan’s military strongman. Bush met with Musharraf December 4, just four days after the official who was serving as Pakistan’s acting president while Musharraf visited Europe and the Americas signed into law legislation that allows Musharraf to continue as both the country’s military chief and its president.

In October, Pakistan’s National Assembly—which was elected in 2002 under rules contrived to secure a pro-Musharraf majority—passed the “President to Hold Another Office Bill-2004” over strenuous opposition objections. The bill overrode the legal guarantee Musharraf had given in December 2003 that he would step down as army chief by the end of this year.

If there were any doubt that the White House fully supports Musharraf’s latest power grab, it was dispelled by Bush. The US President proclaimed Pakistan “a model for other Muslim countries, as they seek to move toward democracy.” A senior Bush administration official added that thanks to Musharraf “the institutions of democracy are strong; he’s making them stronger.”

Musharraf’s refusal to give up his post as Pakistan’s Commander of Armed Services or COAS underscores the fragility of his regime, which the US considers a pivotal ally in its war on terrorism. There is widespread and deep-rooted popular opposition to the Musharraf regime’s neo-liberal economic policies, as well as to its role in facilitating the US conquest of Afghanistan and support for Washington’s ongoing drive to secure geo-political control dominance in the Middle East and Central Asia.

The geo-political shifts the US has forced Musharraf to make since September 2001—the withdrawal of Pakistan’s patronage of the Taliban regime, the curbing of Pakistan’s support for the insurgency in Indian-held Kashmir, and the launching of peace negotiations with India—have also alienated significant sections of Pakistan’s elite, including much of the Muslim *ulema* and elements in the country’s military and intelligence services.

Benazir Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party denounced the signing into law of the legislation allowing Musharraf to remain as the COAS. “It is perhaps the last nail in the coffin of democracy in Pakistan,” declared a PPP spokesman. Khwaja Saad Rafique, a central leader of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), which is loyal to Nawaz Sharif, the prime minister whom Musharraf deposed in his 1999 coup, said all democratic institutions in the country have been severely hurt by Musharraf’s latest powerplay.

The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal or MMA, a coalition of six Islamic parties, had already launched an agitation against Musharraf’s plans to retain the country’s two most powerful

posts. MMA spokesman Hafiz Hussain Ahmed said the MMA “would not accept” the legislation and will both step up its campaign to pressure Musharraf to resign as COAS and petition the courts to have the “President to Hold Another Office Law” ruled unconstitutional.

Last year the MMA broke ranks with the PPP, the PML-N and other opposition parties and voted in favor of a series of constitutional amendments—the so-called Legal Framework Order—that gave constitutional sanction to Musharraf’s coup and other actions and gives the military an enlarged, permanent say in formulating government policy. The MMA justified its support for these changes with the claim that it had secured a guarantee, in the form of an amendment to the constitution, that Musharraf would resign as COAS by the end of 2004. This is the guarantee Musharraf has now had set aside.

During his trip to the US Musharraf was eager to rebut claims that the Pakistani military has reduced its efforts to root out Al Qaeda and Taliban supporters who have found refuge in tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. The Pakistan military’s campaign in South Waziristan has been heavily criticized by the opposition parties and Pakistani press for its use of indiscriminate violence and colonial-style collective punishments. In late November, a Pakistani military official announced that troops would be withdrawn from South Waziristan, but under US pressure the Musharraf regime scaled down the troop redeployment. On November 30 US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told reporters, “Pakistani officials have said that there has been no withdrawal” and remain “fully committed to continuing the campaign against Al Qaeda and its supporters.”

The White House apparently was pleased with the Pakistani government’s response, since neither Bush nor his officials raised, at least publicly the South Waziristan issue, during Musharraf’s visit.

The US government has committed to supplying Pakistan with \$3 billion in aid, much of it military. But, because of India’s strong objections, Washington has thus far resisted Pakistani government pleas that it authorize Islamabad’s longstanding request to purchase F-16 fighters. Musharraf said he had raised the issue in his talks with US officials, but no agreement was reached.

Bush is reported to have agreed that the US and Pakistan should consider a free trade pact and urged Musharraf to play a role in brokering a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but these proposals appear to have had little real substance to them. Rather they were aimed at helping Musharraf to deflect criticism at home that he is a lackey of Washington and that he has sold Pakistan’s support to the US on the cheap.

Musharraf is involved in a complex highwire act, as he tries to

accommodate Washington's demands, which conflict with popular anti-imperialist sentiment and often cut across longstanding policies and strategic orientations of the Pakistani elite.

Some of the multiple pressures on Musharraf were indicated in an interview he gave to CNN Dec. 6. Pakistan's military strongman said the US invasion of Iraq had made the world "less safe" and when asked directly if he thought the invasion was a mistake, replied, "with hindsight, yes. We have landed ourselves in more trouble, yes." Sensitive to the profound popular opposition to the US conquest of Iraq, Musharraf has resisted Washington's pleas for Pakistan to send troops to assist the US-British occupation.

But Musharraf is also mindful that he cannot afford to alienate Washington, the principal support of his regime. Thus he hastened to add; that he was not suggesting the US should withdraw from Iraq now, because that "would create more problems in the region."

Subsequently CNN reported that a Pakistani government spokesman had called to say that Musharraf did not intend to be "categorical in his assertion that Bush had erred in invading Iraq."

The Pakistani elite, especially the military, has long cultivated the Islamic parties as a right-wing bulwark against the working class and socialism. Musharraf has continued this policy. During the 2002 elections, his regime discriminated against the two major opposition parties, the PPP and PML-N, to the benefit of the Islamic fundamentalist MMA. He has allowed the MMA to govern the North-West Frontier Province and supported a coalition government between the pro-military Pakistan Muslim League-Q and the MMA in Baluchistan.

It was thus not at all surprising that the MMA came to Musharraf's aid in securing passage of the constitutional amendments in December 2003.

But over the past 12 months relations between the MMA and the government have become strained over the government's softening of its stand on Kashmir, its attempts to exert greater state control over the *madrasahs* (religious schools), and its introduction of other measures designed, partly with the aim of placating the US, at fostering "moderate" Islam. Meanwhile the MMA, especially in the areas adjoining Afghanistan, has won increased popular support because it has given voice, far more than either the PPP or PML-N, to the popular opposition to Musharraf's pro-US stance and the US's illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq.

With the MMA launching a campaign aimed at forcing him to give up his military post, Musharraf and his representatives have sent out feelers to the PPP and PML (N) in the hopes of bolstering his hand. For their part, the main bourgeoisie parties are eager to obtain a share of power and, whilst they rail against Musharraf, are anxious not to weaken the military, which they recognize is the principal defender of the unity of the Pakistan state and defender of capitalist property.

The husband of former PPP Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, Asif Zardari, had repeatedly been refused bail. But on November 21, after 8 years in detention, a three member bench of Pakistan Supreme Court ordered him released on 1 million rupees (about \$US17,000) bail. Both government officials and Zardari denied that the courts had been influenced by the government or that there

was any deal between Musharraf and Zardari. But Benazir Bhutto conceded in a television interview that "there have been meetings with Asif Zardari and my party leaders for political reconciliation."

According to the *Dawn*, the government is now ready to allow a PPP senator, Raza Rabbani, to be appointed opposition leader in the Senate, the upper house of Pakistan's parliament. Earlier this year, the Speaker of the National Assembly flouted parliamentary tradition and secured the naming of an MMA MP as head of the official opposition in the lower house, although the MMA is not the biggest opposition party.

On December 5, the Indian newspaper the *Hindu* reported that there have been secret discussions between the officials of the President's secretariat, Pakistan's military intelligence and the country's main intelligence agency (the ISI) with both Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif and that these could lead to fresh parliamentary elections next year, if they agree to support Musharraf's re-election as president in 2007. Musharraf was said to be resisting allowing either Sharif, who he exiled, or Benazir Bhutto, whose has chosen not return to Pakistan because of outstanding criminal charges against her, to return as Prime Minister.

Last Friday, Information Minister Sheik Rashid Ahmed, announced that Musharraf has initiated a process of 'national reconciliation' and that all politicians, including Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif' were "very much in contact with the government." Ahmed's statement was angrily denied by PPP and PML-N leaders at separate press conferences the next day. The PML-N information secretary said Sharif had asked him to clarify that his party does not believe in holding talks with a "usurper and dictator", while a PPP spokesman said the government was mounting a "disinformation campaign".

Meanwhile, the head of the MMA in the Senate, said the Islamic parties would be ready to participate in a government of "national consensus" under President Musharraf if only the general would adhere to the constitution as amended last December and give up his post as military commander.



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