

Bush reaffirms support for Pakistani dictator

Keith Jones
26 August 2006

US President George W. Bush made a demonstrative show of US support for Pakistan's military strongman, Pervez Musharraf, Wednesday—the very day that the bourgeois opposition launched a campaign to end seven years of military rule.

Bush telephoned Musharraf Wednesday, ostensibly to consult with him about the war on terror and the crisis in the Middle East. But the message was unmistakable: Washington stands full-square behind the dictator Musharraf in any confrontation with the “united opposition”—an alliance led by the country's traditional governing parties, Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Nawar Sharif's Muslim League (N), and by the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), a six-party coalition of Islamic fundamentalist parties.

A Pakistani Foreign Ministry statement touted Bush as having expressed “deep appreciation” of Pakistan's role in fighting terrorism. The US president, the statement added, said he looks forward to discussing strengthening “the strategic relationship between Pakistan and the United States” when the general-president visits Washington on Sept. 21 and 22.

The opposition to Musharraf has long been fractured, with the PPP and the MMA, in particular, trading accusations that the other is insincere in its opposition to the government.

The Islamists parties have traditionally been patronized by the military and have been allowed by the military regime to serve as the government of the North-West Frontier Province and as a coalition partner in the government of Baluchistan. In December 2003, the MMA made a deal with Musharraf that enabled him to secure parliamentary approval for a package of constitutional amendments that provided a fig-leaf of legitimacy to his 1999 coup, dramatically increased the powers of the presidency, and, through the creation of a military-dominated National Security Council, institutionalized the military's dominance over state policy.

Bhutto and her PPP, initially applauded Musharraf's coup. In recent years they have held on-again, off-again backroom negotiations with the government about a political realignment under which the PPP would gain a share of power in return for allowing Musharraf to continue as president.

Pressure for the opposition to join forces against Musharraf has increased since the Chief of Pakistan's Armed Services made clear he intends to remain president till at least 2012 and that he is preparing to manipulate the constitution and use the

state's powers of patronage and repression to stage-manage his “re-election” in the fall of 2007.

There is also growing dissatisfaction with the government, among both ordinary Pakistanis and the elite. Working people are angered by spiraling prices, repressive labor laws, deepening social inequality, and Islamabad's support for the Bush administration and its wars of conquest. Many among the elite, meanwhile, believe the benefits of Pakistan's recent spurt in economic growth are flowing disproportionately to cronies of the Musharraf regime and that Pakistan is not being sufficiently rewarded by Washington for tying itself so closely to the US.

Musharraf's regime also continues to be buffeted by an insurgency in resource-rich Baluchistan and by resistance to the attempts of the government to extend its control over the largely autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas, where supporters of the Taliban have found refuge.

Musharraf and his prime minister, former Citibank vice-president Shaukat Aziz, routinely cite the corruption that prevailed when Benazir Bhutto and Nawar Sharif governed as justification for the 1999 coup and the effective exile of the leaders of the country's two biggest parties.

But in June the Supreme Court cancelled the privatization of Pakistan Steel Mills, the country's largest industrial concern, on the grounds that it had been improperly carried out. Opposition politicians have charged that in this and other privatizations the government skewed the bidding process to favour its friends and sold-off state assets on the cheap.

For months the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD)—a grouping that unites the PPP, ML (N), and several smaller parties—and the MMA have been conferring on, and wrangling over, the aims and logistics of a joint anti-government campaign.

Their campaign was finally launched Wednesday with the tabling of a motion of non-confidence in Prime Minister Aziz and his government in the National Assembly. The 500-page motion accuses Aziz's government of a litany of abuses and crimes. These include: violating the country's privatization laws, allowing profiteering in the sugar and cement industries, facilitating the military's emergence as the country's largest landowner and the forcible eviction of whole villages from lands coveted by the military, and mounting a campaign of terror including mass arrests and indiscriminate killings in

Baluchistan and Waziristan.

This motion will almost certainly fail. Through manipulation and outright ballot-rigging, the military and government bureaucracy secured a pro-Musharraf majority in the 2002 elections, a majority that has subsequently been held together through patronage, bribery and intimidation. For example, in April 2004, the head of the ARD and acting president of the ML (N), National Assembly member Makhddom Javed Hashmi, was sentenced to 23 years in prison in a secret trial on trumped up sedition charges.

The “united opposition” says its aim in bringing the non-confidence motion is to initiate a broad campaign of anti-government protests within and outside parliament.

Whether the opposition will make good on its promise to mount an anti-government agitation remains to be seen. The government has repeatedly demonstrated its readiness to employ mass arrests and violence to quell protests, most recently in the savage attack mounted against teachers in Karachi who were protesting a provincial government ban on their belonging to a union or professional association. The opposition parties, moreover, are themselves reluctant to call for demonstrations and strikes, because their fear a mass movement against Musharraf could quickly escape their control.

The press has been counseling compromise. Typical was an editorial in the August 24 issue of the *Nation*: “[I]nstead of allowing the struggle between the government and the opposition, which has by and large remained confined to Parliament, to spill out into the streets, both sides need to consider the consequences of the ensuing political uncertainty on the national polity and economy. ... [T]here is a need for both sides to reduce the tension and resolve outstanding issues through talks ... It would promote confidence among the opposition if in the meanwhile the exiled leaders are allowed to return.”

But Musharraf and his supporters in the pro-military Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam) are loath to part with any power, because they are cognizant of their lack of popular support. In December 2003, Musharraf promised the MMA that in exchange for its support for his constitutional amendments he would give up his post as head of Pakistan’s military within the next 12 months. More than two and a half years later Musharraf still clings to his military command and steadfastly refuses to say if and when he will give it up, although the holding of both posts is a flagrant violation of the country’s constitution.

Musharraf has been hailed by the Bush administration as a pivotal ally in its “war on terrorism,” since Islamabad withdrew its support for the Taliban regime in September 2001 and gave the US logistical support in conquering Afghanistan.

Among the many services the Pakistan regime has rendered Washington is in mounting “aggressive interrogations”—i.e., torturing—alleged terror suspects, thereby enabling US security forces to circumvent US and international laws against torture.

Both Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair lauded the Pakistani authorities for their role in “unearthing” the purported London airport terror plot earlier this month. Although US and British authorities have failed to substantiate their claims that they prevented a major terrorist atrocity, they have used the alleged London plot to drum up support for a further build up of the repressive powers of the state and for their predatory foreign policy, from the occupation of Iraq to support for Israel’s aggression against Lebanon.

Nevertheless, there have been increasing frictions between Islamabad and Washington—frictions largely born of the increasing breadth and scope of US ambitions in South and Central Asia and the Middle East.

Washington is intent on scuttling Pakistan’s plans to build a pipeline bringing natural gas from Iran. It has increasingly favored India over Pakistan in the jockeying for influence in Afghanistan, and most importantly, it has signed a civilian nuclear accord with India, which will allow Pakistan’s historic rival to focus its indigenous nuclear program on weapons production. Pakistan has responded by seeking to strengthen its trade, nuclear and military ties with China.

But when push comes to shove the Bush administration—and this is the significance of Wednesday’s telephone conversation between Bush and Musharraf—views Pakistan’s dictatorial regime as a linchpin of its policy in West, Central and South Asia and the Pakistani army as the only guarantor of a stable, i.e., pro-US, Pakistan.

The US, under Bill Clinton, gave its blessings to Musharraf’s 1999 coup and since 2001 Washington has emerged as the principal bulwark of his regime, providing billions in loans, aid, and payments for military services and declaring Pakistan a “major non-NATO ally.”

World opinion has rightly been outraged by the Bush administration’s illegal war of conquest against Iraq and its connivance in Israel’s collective punishment of the Lebanese people. But the democratic rights of 150 million Pakistanis are also casualties of Bush’s war on terror.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact