

Following bloodbath in Karachi

US reaffirms support for Musharraf

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22 May 2007

The Bush administration has reiterated its support for Pakistan's military strongman, General Pervez Musharraf, in the wake of bloody, government-orchestrated attacks on opposition protesters in Karachi, May 12 and 13, that left more than forty people dead.

The violence, which was perpetrated by armed thugs of the pro-Musharraf Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), was aimed at stamping out a mounting wave of anti-government protests. But on Monday, May 14, most of Pakistan's major cities, including Lahore, Peshwar, Quetta, and especially Karachi, were paralyzed by a general strike called by the opposition parties to protest the previous weekend's violence. There is a "complete strike in Karachi," conceded the police chief Azhar Faruqi to the *Guardian*. The next day large numbers of teachers demonstrated in Lahore against government plans to privatize the education system.

Musharraf's attempt to sack the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court has served as the trigger for the anti-government protests. But the protests are the product of deep-rooted popular opposition to Musharraf's authoritarian rule, support for and complicity in the US's wars of aggression against Afghanistan and Iraq, and his implementation of neo-liberal economic policies, which have increased economic insecurity and social inequality.

At a press briefing last Wednesday, US State Department spokesman Tom Casey pointedly refused to make any criticism of Musharraf or his political allies for unleashing terror on the streets of Pakistan's largest city, then reaffirmed Washington's support for the man who doubles as Pakistan's president and chief of armed services.

In response to a multi-part question that solicited US reaction to the Karachi violence and suggested there might be "concern" within the administration that Musharraf is "losing the handle on the situation," Casey began by observing that the violence had abated, without breathing a word as to who had fomented it, and

concluded by declaring, "I don't think our assessment has fundamentally changed about him [Musharraf] or his role in Pakistani society."

The previous day, US special envoy Ronald Neumann had pressed Pakistani officials during meetings in Islamabad to step up efforts to combat the Taliban in Pakistan and to cooperate more closely with Afghanistan's US-installed government. Neumann told reporters Musharraf had not reached his "full capacity" in fighting "terrorism and extremism." But he also made clear that Musharraf remains a pivotal ally of the Bush administration in the "war on terror"—that is in the US drive to gain a strategic stranglehold over the oil supplies of Central Asia and the Middle East. "I don't think Musharraf has reached the end of the line," declared Neumann.

A former US ambassador to Kabul, Neumann said Washington would provide additional funding to Pakistan to increase military patrols on its border with Afghanistan.

According to a report in Sunday's *New York Times*, the Bush administration has rejected calls from the US military for Washington to tie the payments that it makes to the Pakistani military for logistical support for the Afghan occupation and fighting the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Pakistan to "Pakistan's performance" in the so-called war on terror.

These payments, which are dubbed "coalition support funds," are said to have averaged \$80 million per month since October 2001, or equal to about a fifth of all Pakistani military spending, and to have surpassed a total of \$5.6 billion.

The *Times* linked the White House's refusal to threaten Islamabad with a cut in "coalition support funds" to its fears for the future of the Musharraf regime: "The administration, according to some current and former officials, is fearful of cutting off the cash or linking it to performance for fear of further destabilizing Pakistan's president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, who is facing the

biggest challenges to his rule since he took power in 1999.”

Musharraf’s March 9 suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry on corruption charges was a transparent attempt to stage-manage his “re-election” as president. Although Chaudhry had given his legal blessing to Musharraf’s 1999 coup and other patently unconstitutional acts, he has authored a number of decisions that cut across the government’s agenda since becoming chief justice. This caused Musharraf to fear he couldn’t count on Justice Chaudhry to provide a judicial fig-leaf for his phony re-election this fall by a presidential college comprised of the legislators elected in military-manipulated elections in 2002.

But the general-president’s attempt to rid himself of the uncooperative judge has backfired, becoming a catalyst for popular protests, while serving to alienate much of the legal-juridical establishment.

Justice Chaudhry has a long, dishonorable record of serving Musharraf and the military and as a judge has upheld the capitalist socio-economic order that has condemned Pakistani’s toilers to abject poverty. If he has emerged as something of a popular figure, it is because his defiance of the general-president and pro-democracy speeches stand in marked contrast with the actions of the various bourgeois opposition parties. While repeatedly promising to launch a “final struggle” against the Musharraf regime the opposition has in fact continued to cooperate with it.

Thus the six-party Islamacist alliance, the MMA, voted in December 2003 for constitutional amendments sanctioning Musharraf’s 1999 coup and his remaining head of the armed forces while president and, to this day, the MMA serves in a coalition government in Baluchistan alongside the principal pro-Musharraf party, the PML (Q).

Meanwhile, Benazir Bhutto’s Pakistani People’s Party (PPP), which poses as a progressive even “socialist” party, has long been involved in negotiations to strike a deal with Musharraf under which the PPP would be given a share of power in return for supporting the general remaining president till 2012.

The Bush administration and the British government have been actively promoting a PPP-Musharraf partnership. Bhutto, for her part, has been courting the Bush administration by promising to be a more effective supporter of the US “war on terror” than the current Pakistani regime.

But there are many obstacles to a deal between Musharraf and Bhutto, including fears within the PPP that

support for their party, which already suffered a huge erosion due to its implementation of IMF policies when it led Pakistan’s government in the late 1980s and 1990s, would hemorrhage were it to throw in its lot with Musharraf.

Moreover recent events have caused Bhutto, at least for the moment, to publicly downplay the imminence of a deal with Musharraf. No doubt she calculates that she can extract better terms from a weakened Musharraf, but also that before committing her party to partnering with the general she should first find out whether he will be able to ride out the storm. Speaking with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio service last week, Bhutto said now was not the time to negotiate with Musharraf about “an emerging partnership.” But she could envisage working with him if he “were to make the compromises necessary to respond to the sentiments of the people.”

Bhutto is now urging Musharraf to “call a round-table conference of all political leaders, including the exiled prime ministers, to evolve a consensus for transparent elections.”

Musharraf, meanwhile, has vowed that neither Bhutto, nor Nawaz Sharif, whom he deposed in his 1999 coup, will be allowed back into the country before the elections.

And in what has all the trademarks of a contract-killing, Hammad Raza, a registrar of the Supreme Court was murdered May 14 at his home in the capital of Islamabad. Raza was to be a key witness for suspended Chief Justice Chaudhry. One of Chaudhry’s lawyers, Tariq Mehmood, told Reuters, Raza “was witness to many things, like the chief justice said in his petition that some files were removed from his chamber on the day he was suspended.” Raza’s family is challenging police claims that the murder was the result of a burglary. They report that he was under “much pressure” in the days prior to his murder.



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