

Bush administration rushes to Pakistani dictator's aid

Keith Jones, Vilani Peiris
22 June 2007

Top Bush administration and Pentagon officials have held intensive consultations with Pakistan's embattled military regime during the past two weeks with the aim of bolstering the autocratic rule of General Pervez Musharraf and securing increased Pakistani military support in staunching the insurgency against Afghanistan's US-installed government.

US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte, US assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asia, Richard Boucher, and Admiral William Fallon, head of the Pentagon's Central Command, all visited Pakistan last week. On Monday, Pakistan's Foreign Affairs Minister Khurshid Mahmood Kasuri began a five-day US visit.

Speaking to reporters shortly before a meeting Monday with Kasuri, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice reiterated the Bush administration's strong support for Musharraf. "I think," said Rice, "you have to look at the last five years and say that President Musharraf has been a good ally in the war on terror. He has undertaken some important reforms in Pakistan."

Two days earlier, Negroponte had made clear that Musharraf is under no pressure from the US to give up his post as head of Pakistan's armed forces—a post he has clung to despite the Pakistani constitution's specific prohibition on a military officer serving as president. Said Negroponte, "It's up to him (General Musharraf) to decide when to take off his uniform."

When pressed as to whether the US will endorse Musharraf's scheme to have himself "re-elected" president this fall by national and provincial legislatures chosen five years ago in elections stage-managed by the military, Bush administration officials say that it is up to the Pakistani people to decide "when those elections are held, how they are held and all that goes on around them."

In other words, if Musharraf, who seized power in a military coup eight years ago, can manipulate his "reelection" without provoking mass unrest, he has Washington's blessing.

Important sections of the US political and geo-political establishment have, in recent weeks, taken to counseling the Bush administration to step back from its unqualified support for Musharraf and this for two reasons.

First, they don't think that the Musharraf regime has been sufficiently aggressive in preventing Afghan insurgents from finding refuge in Pakistan and in otherwise stamping out support for the Taliban and Al Qaeda in tribal regions bordering Afghanistan. A Pakistani government that has received at least \$10 billion in aid and payments from the US since September 2001

should, they contend, be more pliant to US wishes.

Second, they fear that Musharraf is losing his grip on power, that the autocratic character of his regime and its corruption have stripped it of any popular legitimacy. These fears have grown substantially since Musharraf's attempt to sack the chief justice of the Supreme Court, whom he feared might not rubber stamp his phony reelection, backfired, precipitating an escalating campaign of anti-government rallies and demonstrations.

The *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and various think tanks are urging the Bush administration to begin actively planning for a "post-Musharraf" Pakistan and to reach out to the traditional political elite that has been sidelined by Musharraf and the military, especially Benazir Bhutto and her Pakistan People's Party (PPP). Support for the PPP, which postures as a progressive, even socialist party, has declined precipitously since two spells in office during the 1980s and 1990s when it imposed the neo-liberal policy prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund. But, according to most observers, the PPP alone among the various parties has a significant nationwide base of support.

The Bush administration is not averse to Musharraf striking a deal with the PPP under which the general remains president and Bhutto or her nominee becomes prime minister and would be prepared to help broker such an arrangement. But it has signaled that any deal should be on the general's terms and those of the military brass on whose support he depends.

Musharraf is loath to cede to Bhutto's demand that he respect the constitution and give up his post as commander of Pakistan armed services for he recognizes he has no popular constituency. An added complication is the pro-military Pakistan Muslim League (Q)'s bitter opposition to any deal with Bhutto. The PML (Q) leaders, who currently hold most of the key cabinet posts and political appointments, would invariably lose most if not all their perks and privileges in the event of a PPP-Musharraf partnership.

Both Boucher and Negroponte met with opposition leaders while in Pakistan. Boucher also met with the head of the Pakistani election commission. The opposition has complained that tens of millions of names have been left off the recently published electoral list. The opposition parties have also denounced the commission for refusing to publish the list on the Internet, which would greatly facilitate its verification during the relatively brief period voters have to ask that their names be added to the electoral rolls.

Negroponte was evasive when asked if he had discussed with

Musharraf or other government officials the possibility of the military forging an alliance with the PPP. “Only in general was this issue discussed during my meetings with various people,” said Negroponte.

The Musharraf regime has been groping for a strategy to contain the opposition protests that erupted following Musharraf’s March 9 suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry.

As the protest grew in strength in April, there were suggestions from persons in and around the government that Musharraf might try to cut his losses and allow the chief justice to be reinstated by his Supreme Court colleagues, while making the former Citibank vice-president who serves as his prime minister take the fall for Chaudhry’s botched removal.

But on May 12-13, the Musharraf regime unleashed bloody violence in Karachi, Pakistan’s largest city. With the connivance of the security forces, thugs organized by the pro-Musharraf MQM mounted attacks on opposition supporters that left more than 40 people dead. Musharraf subsequently defended the MQM violence, saying that the opposition was responsible for the violence because it had failed to cede to government pressure it cancel a rally in support of Chief Justice Chaudhry.

Earlier this month, the government announced draconian new restrictions on the broadcasting of live events and talk shows, only to back down the following week in the face of an outcry from the press and public.

Rifts, meanwhile, have opened up within the government camp. The PML (Q) has tried to disassociate itself from the Karachi violence. The MQM—whose base of support is among the *mohajirs*, Urdu-speakers who fled to Pakistan from north India between 1947 and the 1950s and who are concentrated in the Sindh cities of Karachi and Hyderabad—is pressing for a devolution of powers to the provinces. As for the general-president, he has denounced the PML (Q) leadership for leaving him in the lurch.

The government is claiming that its pro-investor policies have led to increased economic growth and a reduction in poverty, but not even the World Bank considers the government’s poverty claims credible and inflation of close to 8 percent and more than 10 percent for food is causing increasing popular hardship. In recent weeks riots have erupted repeatedly in Karachi due to power cuts carried out by the Karachi Electric Supply Corporation, one of many companies privatized under the Musharraf regime.

While Karachis unquestionably are outraged over the power cuts, that sometime last as long as 12 to 16 hours, the protests are also being fueled by anger over the events of last month and by the perception that the government is in crisis.

Musharraf and his officials have repeatedly had to deny that they are planning to impose martial law. But even without it, opposition activists are routinely arrested in the hundreds and journalists have increasingly become the targets of threats and violence.

Last month’s bloody events in Karachi underscore that the Musharraf regime stands ready to try to drown the opposition in blood. It certainly has not passed unnoticed in Karachi that the Bush administration has never breathed a single word of criticism of the Pakistani authorities for the Karachi violence and that the most recent US envoy to Islamabad, John Negroponte, is a man

with a foul and bloody record as a point man for US imperialism, including stints as US ambassador to Honduras under Ronald Reagan and US ambassador to Iraq in 2004-2005.

Apart from the support of the Bush administration, the chief reason the Musharraf regime remains in power is the cowardice and complicity of the bourgeois opposition. All its various strands are tied to the military and ultimately see it as the chief bulwark of their class privileges and of the Pakistani state.

The mass protests against Justice Chaudhry’s dismissal and the violent attacks perpetrated by the MQM in Karachi have disrupted the backroom negotiations Bhutto and the PPP leadership were conducting with Musharraf. But the PPP’s chairperson for life has continued to make clear her willingness to work with Musharraf if he sheds his presidential uniform and the PPP’s readiness to help validate Musharraf’s phony reelection as president. Bhutto has indicated that should Musharraf try to have himself declared reelected president by the current legislatures the PPP will not join the other opposition parties in resigning from the legislatures en masse.

In keeping with this orientation, the PPP is pursuing close ties with the US political establishment, including the Republican right. PPP leaders have held several meetings with representatives of the International Republican Institute and the PPP web site currently features an article written by one Lisa Curtis. Currently a Heritage Foundation senior research fellow, Curtis has previously worked for Republican Senator Richard Lugar and the US State Department and is a decorated former CIA analyst.

Nawaz Sharif, the head of the PML (Nawaz) and a wealthy industrialist, leads a party that was founded with military support and for many years himself benefited in his business and political careers from the military’s patronage.

The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal, the six-party alliance of Islamic fundamentalist parties, benefited from the military’s support in the 2002 elections and returned the favor by providing the votes needed to pass a series of constitutional amendments that gave post facto legality to Musharraf’s 1999 coup, expanded his power as president, and gave the military a dominant constitutional role in shaping key areas of government policy. To this day, the MMA rules the North-West Frontier Province under Musharraf and governs Baluchistan in a coalition with the pro-military PML (Q).



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact