

The US media “discovers” Pakistan’s Musharraf is a dictator—why now?

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The *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times* have all published editorials in recent days taking the Bush administration to task for its unabashed and unequivocal support for Pakistan’s military dictator, General Pervez Musharraf.

In an editorial titled “Musharraf’s follies: When will the US hold the Pakistani president accountable for his abuse of power?” the *Los Angeles Times* compared the Bush administration’s support for Musharraf to the “terrible mistake” the US made in propping up three Cold War dictators who were ultimately swept from power by popular upheavals—the Shah of Iran, Nicaragua’s Anastasio Somoza, and the Philippines’ Ferdinand Marcos.

“Replace,” said the *LA Times*, “the words ‘reliably anti-communist’ with ‘reliable US ally in the war on terror,’ and despair at the Bush administration’s willingness to excuse heinous repression from Egypt to Saudi Arabia to Azerbaijan. Worst of all is its policy toward Pakistan, where the administration refuses to distance the US from the increasingly errant autocrat Pervez Musharraf.”

Bill Clinton’s Democratic administration made no fuss in the fall of 1999 when Musharraf, then as now the chief of Pakistan’s armed services, seized power. After all, the Pentagon has enjoyed an intimate partnership with Pakistan’s military since the early 1950s and Washington’s political establishment, for almost as long, has held the military to be the chief bulwark of a “stable Pakistan.”

But the Bush administration has not just acquiesced to military rule in Pakistan. It has lavished praise and gobs of money on the Musharraf regime, declared Pakistan a “major non-NATO ally” of the US, repeatedly hailed the general as a pivotal leader in the war on terror, and proclaimed the various maneuvers he has taken to perpetuate military rule and run roughshod over the country’s constitution as steps on the road to “full democracy.”

Till now the US media has essentially peddled the administration’s line. Certainly there has been no chorus of media voices pointing out the incongruity and downright absurdity of the Bush administration’s claims to have restored democracy in Afghanistan by entrenching military rule in Pakistan.

New York Times inadvertently admitted ~~The~~ only complicity when in its May 23 editorial, “Propping up the General,” it counseled the Bush administration to “use the leverage it gets from [providing Islamabad] roughly \$2 billion a year in aid to encourage an early return to democratic rule.” An early return—after seven years and seven months of military dictatorship!

If sections of the press have now “discovered” that Musharraf is a despot, it is because they fear that the general is losing his grip and are anxious about the consequences for US interests and influence in Pakistan, as well as for the US’s larger strategic ambitions in South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East.

Since March, Pakistan has been convulsed by a mounting political crisis—a crisis that has precipitated the largest anti-government protests since Musharraf seized power and that has split the legal establishment.

The trigger for this crisis was Musharraf’s sacking of the chief justice of the Supreme Court, whom the general feared could not be relied upon to rubber stamp his phony “reelection” as president. But the opposition to the trumped-up corruption case against the chief justice is fueled by the absence of democracy, neo-liberal economic policies that have resulted in deepening social inequality and economic insecurity, and Musharraf’s support for US imperialism in its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Desperate to stamp out the mounting challenge to his authority, Musharraf unleashed murderous violence on the streets of Karachi, Pakistan’s principal city, on May 12-13. More than 40 people were killed in two days of violence orchestrated by the thugs of the pro-Musharraf MQM in connivance with the authorities of Karachi and Sind province.

This bloodbath has only served to underscore the popular feeling that the Musharraf regime has become intolerable. As for Musharraf’s political cronies, they are publicly fighting amongst themselves as they seek to escape public opprobrium.

The Bush administration, meanwhile, has remained steadfast in its support for the general-president, issuing not a word of criticism of the Pakistani government in the wake of the violence in Karachi. (See “Following bloodbath in Karachi: US reaffirms support for Musharraf”)

The editors of the *New York Times*, *LA Times* and *Burton* many ways it was the dictatorship of General Zia-ul Haq (1977-88) that has proven the most destructive to the social fabric of Pakistan. The US made Zia's regime the pivot of its strategy of fanning, in alliance with the Saudi regime, an Islamic fundamentalist rebellion against Afghanistan's pro-Soviet government and ensnaring the Soviet Red Army in a counterinsurgency war. Pakistan's role in arming and organizing the Islamicist insurgency in Afghanistan dove-tailed with Zia's own efforts to use Islam to legitimize his regime and to promote the religious right as a bulwark against the working class and all progressive thought.

In fact, the Bush administration has signaled that it would like Musharraf to reach a deal with Benazir Bhutto and her Pakistan People's Party (PPP). But such a deal has floundered over the division of the prerogatives and spoils of office, and the Bush administration fears that without the iron fist of military rule Pakistan could become embroiled in class and ethnic conflicts menacing to US interests.

There is also, undoubtedly, concern in the Bush administration that a change of regime in Islamabad could endanger various sordid, secret operations that US military and security forces are currently carrying out in Pakistan, including the warehousing and torture of alleged terrorists and training exercises for an attack on Iran.

Whilst fear that Musharraf is stoking a popular rebellion that could threaten US interests is the principal reason sections of the press are now calling for the Bush administration to distance itself from the general and begin planning for a "post-Musharraf Pakistan," it is not the only reason.

Put bluntly, many sections of the US establishment don't think they are getting their money's worth from Musharraf. That is to say, they do not think he has been sufficiently pliant in acting on US demands that his government root out Taliban operatives who have found refuge in Pakistan's border areas with Afghanistan and violently suppress a growing indigenous tribal/Taliban insurgency in north and western Pakistan.

All three editorials combine complaints about Musharraf's authoritarian rule with sniping that the general has proven a poor bargain for US imperialism. "Congress," declared *the New York Times*, "must insist that future payments [to Pakistan] be linked to actual counterterrorist activity and results, as some American military officials now recommend."

The Pakistani people have suffered horrendously under the yoke of a string of US armed and sponsored military regimes. The regime of General Ayub Khan (1958-69) ruthlessly suppressed the working class and toilers, while pursuing an industrialization policy that enriched a tiny elite, the so-called 20 families. US President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger encouraged his successor, Yaya Khan, in mounting a campaign of bloody repression against the Bangla-speaking people of East Pakistan (Bangladesh), who had been denied their basis rights within the Pakistan federation. This campaign resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands and caused millions more to seek refuge in India.

Two decades on, Pakistan continues to live with the consequences of the US-backed dictator Zia's Afghan adventure and promotion of Islamicist politics—everything from deep and oftentimes violent cleavages between different Muslim sects and a widespread drug and Kalashnikov culture, to the existence of a well-organized and financed network of Islamicist institutions, political parties and militias.

"One reason" General Musharraf "is unpopular, conceded the *Washington Post*, "is his alliance with the United States."

Yet the PPP, Nawaz Sharif's PML (N) and the rest of the bourgeois opposition clutch to the coattails of the US, hoping—seven-and-a-half-years of rebuffs notwithstanding—that they can convince the Bush administration they can better serve the US's predatory interests than Musharraf.

The venal Pakistani bourgeoisie has always sought to gain money and geopolitical influence by serving imperialist interests. Before Washington, it looked to London.

But the opposition's appeals to Washington are above all grounded in its fears that any popular mobilization against the Musharraf regime could escape its control, undermine the military, and become a threat to the bourgeois order. Second only to the Pakistani military itself do the Benazir Bhuttos and Nawaz Sharifs look to the imperialist powers, and above all the US, as the bulwark of their own privileges, of a socioeconomic order that condemns the vast majority of Pakistanis to a life of poverty, ignorance and squalor.



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