

US seeks to save Pakistani dictator, thwart democracy

Musharraf-Bhutto negotiations near end-game

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Benazir Bhutto, the “life chairperson” of the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), and top aides of Pakistan’s military strongman, General Pervez Musharraf, have been meeting in Dubai this week with the aim of hammering out a power-sharing agreement.

There have been no reports of Bush administration officials participating in the negotiations. So obtrusive a US role in shaping Pakistan’s government would only further fan anti-US sentiment in Pakistan, where Washington is widely reviled for its wars of conquest in Iraq and Afghanistan and for sustaining a series of Pakistani military dictatorships, of which Musharraf’s is only the latest.

But the Bush administration and its close ally, Britain’s Brown Labour government, are very much the moving force behind the attempt to reconcile Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 coup, with Bhutto, who leads a party that poses as left-wing and in the past has spouted socialist phrases.

The Bush administration has been a pillar of the Musharraf regime, rewarding it with at least \$10 billion in aid since it broke off relations with the Taliban and gave crucial logistical support to the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan. President Bush, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and other administration stalwarts have repeatedly hailed Musharraf, lauding him as a courageous ally in the war on terror and an enlightened ruler bent on leading his country to democracy. Needless to say, such praise has gone hand in hand with silence on the military regime’s many gross human rights abuses, including the reign of terror it unleashed in Karachi last May 12.

The Pakistan military, for its part, has been complicit in the Bush administration’s own crimes and not just in Afghanistan. The Musharraf regime has allowed the CIA and other US security agencies to set up illegal prisons and torture centers on Pakistani soil.

But the events of the past six months—above all Musharraf’s inability to staunch the mass protests that erupted against his attempt to sack the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court—have caused the Bush administration to heed London’s counsel and urge Musharraf to reach an accommodation with Bhutto and her PPP.

Washington’s hope is that the PPP, which has hitherto generally been considered the most popular of the traditional parties, can provide a measure of legitimacy to a political set-up in which Musharraf and the US-allied military establishment continue to wield decisive power.

That such a political realignment is being promoted as a bloc of Pakistani “moderates” against Islamic extremism is not just a ruse to exploit popular fears over the growth of Islamic fundamentalism sentiment in the country’s tribal belt and two most backward provinces, the North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan. Washington and London expect, and will demand, that a politically strengthened Musharraf-led regime intensify military operations aimed at rooting out and

disarming Islamic militias and Taliban forces operating in Pakistan. These forces are largely creatures of the Pakistani military-political establishment, but they have fallen out of step with the post-September 11, 2001 realignment of Islamabad’s geo-political strategy, while simultaneously gaining a measure of increased popular support due to opposition to the US rape of Afghanistan and Iraq and the neo-liberal agenda pursued by all Pakistani government over the past two decades.

Bhutto, who for years has been courting Washington’s favor, has in recent months stepped up her efforts to convince the Bush administration that she can be counted on to support a ruthless assault on the Taliban and Islamist militias and their mostly impoverished supporters. She strongly supported the Musharraf regime’s military assault on the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in Islamabad last July, has given public mea culpas for the support her second government provided the Taliban, and has accused Musharraf of temporizing with elements in the Pakistani military-security establishment who continue to connive with the Taliban and other armed Islamist groups.

At the same time she has come out categorically against any popular mobilization against Musharraf, warning that it could quickly spin out of the control of the PPP and other “moderate” forces, and has proclaimed her readiness to work with the US-backed general-president.

On July 27, some two weeks after the Lal Masjid massacre and just seven days after the Supreme Court had ordered Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry reinstated, Musharraf flew to Abu Dhabi for a secret meeting with Bhutto.

There had been on-again, off-again back-channel discussions between the Musharraf regime and the PPP for months, if not years, but this was the first meeting between the general-president and Bhutto since the 1999 coup. Such a political gamble was almost universally interpreted as both a sign of Musharraf’s desperation and that a deal was imminent.

Negotiations soon foundered, however, and on August 16 Musharraf was reputedly only dissuaded from imposing martial law by a late-night emergency telephone call from Condoleezza Rice.

The Bush administration has long shown its contempt for, and indifference to, the democratic rights of the Pakistani people. Its fear was that Musharraf’s power play would backfire, as had his sacking of the chief justice, provoking a storm of protest that could render the country ungovernable, split the military, and threaten vital US interests.

Rice’s intervention gave Musharraf little choice but to make a new attempt to reach an accommodation with Bhutto. The general’s five-year term as president will soon end, and even if he is to violate the constitution by getting himself “re-elected” by the sitting national and provincial legislatures—which were chosen in elections stage-managed by the military in 2002—he will need the backing of the PPP. (In 2003, Musharraf struck a deal with a coalition of Islamic fundamentalist parties,

the MMA, for a series of constitutional amendments ratifying his rule and expanding his powers as president.)

Significant sections of the US political establishment, including much of the Democratic Party, want to see the back of Musharraf, because they believe he hasn't been a sufficiently compliant US ally, especially given the huge aid Washington has lavished on his regime. They have shown their dissatisfaction with Musharraf by supporting and passing legislation tying some US aid to Islamabad to "progress" in suppressing the Taliban in Pakistan and by asserting a US right to intervene militarily in Pakistan.

But there is much evidence to show that Bush and Vice President Cheney want Musharraf to remain as a powerful, military-backed president with Bhutto playing a supporting role. This is a political recalibration that may well prove impossible to negotiate under conditions of intense jockeying for power and extreme political crisis.

Should a deal be struck between Musharraf and Bhutto, it will be hailed by Washington and London and by the PPP as victory for democracy. In reality, it will be the very opposite: a deal sponsored, if not brokered by Washington, for decades the principal bulwark of military rule in Pakistan, and in the interests of furthering predatory US military interventions in Central Asia and the Middle Asia and of sustaining a capitalist socio-political order that has enriched a tiny elite of businessmen, generals, and bureaucrats, while condemning the vast majority of Pakistanis to extreme want and backwardness.

Under such a deal, the PPP would support Musharraf remaining Pakistan's president till the fall of 2012. Musharraf, the Pakistani military, and their political cronies, would, meanwhile, likely commit to the shelving of corruption cases against top PPP leaders, the scrapping of a constitutional prohibition against persons serving a third-term as prime minister, and the establishment of a "neutral" caretaker government pending legislative elections. These measures would pave the way for Bhutto to return from self-imposed exile and become prime minister after elections in early 2008.

Huge obstacles stand in the way of such a deal—including differences over if and when Musharraf will give up his post as head of Pakistan's armed forces and the balance of power between the president and prime minister. Prominent leaders of the PML (Q), the military-sponsored pro-Musharraf party, have said a number of alternatives are under consideration should the talks with Bhutto fail, including prolonging the life of the current legislatures, striking a deal with the MMA or sections of it, and imposing martial law.

Even if a deal is struck, it could quickly unravel under the weight of the multiple crises that envelope the Musharraf regime.

The association of Pakistani lawyers that spearheaded the agitation against Musharraf's attempt to sack Chief Justice Chaudhry has pledged to galvanize the country against any attempt by Musharraf to have himself proclaimed re-elected as president by the sitting legislatures. Pakistan's general-president and his aides have repeatedly said that he intends to do precisely that sometime in the coming weeks—the legislatures' mandates expire in mid-October—and the power-sharing agreement being discussed with Bhutto, from all accounts, is predicated on precisely such an anti-democratic and unconstitutional maneuver.

Nawaz Sharif, head of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) and the man whom Musharraf overthrew in 1999, is vowing to return to the country next Monday to personally lead the opposition to Musharraf.

After the coup, Musharraf and the military dragged Sharif before the courts on a series of charges, including treason, and he was given a life-sentence. But later, in a deal worked out with the government of Saudi Arabia, Sharif was sent into exile for 10 years. On August 23, just days after Sharif petitioned the Supreme Court to allow him to legally return to the country, Pakistan's highest court ruled in his favor, striking down the exile agreement.

Sharif's credentials as a champion of democracy are threadbare. The

scion of a wealthy family of industrialists, he owes his political career to the patronage of the former dictator General Zia and the military-intelligence apparatus. But he clearly calculates he has much to gain by contrasting himself from Bhutto as the intransigent opponent of Musharraf.

Such is the unpopularity of the Musharraf regime, Sharif's return could well become the occasion for mass protests. Fearing such a possibility, the government has rounded up scores of PML (Nawaz) activists.

The success of a Musharraf-Bhutto deal is dependent on its winning the support of the vast bulk of PPP and PML (Q) legislators. Otherwise the two parties will not have the two-thirds majority in the central parliament needed to amend the constitution so as to make portions of their understanding legal. But there is considerable dissension within the PPP over Bhutto's willingness to ally with Musharraf and much of the PML (Q), including some top leaders, is in all but open revolt against a Musharraf-Bhutto deal. Any accommodation with the PPP means the PML (Q) partisans will have to part with a substantial share of their power and patronage.

Similarly Musharraf cannot count on the Supreme Court rubber-stamping his re-election or his continuing to remain as head of the armed forces in flagrant violation of the constitution. (Bhutto has reportedly pressed for Musharraf to have himself elected as "a civilian" president, but the general is loathe to give up his control of the military budget and the selection of the top officer corps, because the military is, and has been, his only true base of support.) The judiciary has a long and sordid history of doing the military's bidding but since defying the military over the sacking of the chief justice it has shown a new found independence.

There is no question that the Musharraf regime is severely socially isolated. While it boasts of its economic successes, the Asian Development Bank reports poverty has swelled to a 32 percent share of the population. The price of foods and other essentials have increased by 50 percent over the past five years. The country is plagued by power shortages and blackouts and even newly built infrastructure is often shoddy or worse. Last week a bridge collapsed in Karachi, the country's largest city, killing nine people just months after its opening.

In urban centers there is widespread opposition to the lack of basic democratic rights and the regime's connivance with religious obscurantists. And much of the business elite resents the extent to which the military and its political cronies have monopolized government contracts and privatization deals.

Musharraf and his US sponsors hope that Bhutto, whose two previous governments quickly lost popular favor after implementing right-wing socio-economic policies, can give the regime and the "war on terror" a fresh and more liberal face. But distraught lower-level PPP functionaries have tried to warn Bhutto that the more she consorts with Musharraf and Bush, the lower her popular standing in Pakistan.



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