

With Washington's blessing

Pakistani regime mounts massive security operation in Sharif deportation

Vilani Peiris, Keith Jones
13 September 2007

With the approval of Washington, Pakistan's US-backed military regime deported former prime minister Nawaz Sharif Monday, just four-and-a-half hours after he returned home from seven years of exile.

Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf—a man for whom US President George W. Bush has repeatedly expressed his personal admiration and affection—deposed Sharif in an October 1999 military coup.

Fearing Sharif would make good on his vow to lead an agitation to force Musharraf to resign as president and armed services chief, Pakistan's military regime mounted a massive security operation, with the double aim of apprehending and expelling Sharif and preventing his supporters from taking to the streets.

Islamabad airport was closed down Monday morning and sealed off by thousands of paramilitary Rangers, Pakistani army Elite Force commandos, and Punjabi police. Supporters of Sharif who approached the 5-kilometer security cordon that the Pakistan military and security forces had placed around the airport were met with baton charges and teargas.

As Sharif's Pakistan International Airline flight neared Islamabad, Pakistani security forces jammed all mobile phone communication in the vicinity of the airport. Shortly after the flight landed, commandos stormed onto the plane and surrounded the former prime minister.

In the days and hours leading up to Sharif's return, security forces detained more than 2,000 activists from Sharif's political party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Sharif), and parties that are aligned with it in the newly formed All-Parties Democratic Movement. The arrested included members of the Pakistani parliament. Two days after Sharif's expulsion to Saudi Arabia, many of those arrested remained in detention.

Sharif's expulsion and the massive security operation mounted against his supporters make a mockery of Musharraf's claim that his regime will soon preside over free and fair elections to the country's national and provincial assemblies.

Sharif's second exile is also in direct contravention of an order of the Supreme Court. On August 23 Pakistan's highest court ruled the agreement Sharif had struck with Musharraf and the military in 2000—after the regime had orchestrated his conviction on treason and corruption charges, and that called for him to live in exile in Saudi Arabia for 10 years—could not prevent the deposed

prime minister from exercising his right as a Pakistani citizen to return to his homeland when he wished. (As part of the 2000 bargain, Musharraf set aside Sharif's criminal convictions, declaring him "pardoned.")

The Musharraf regime has sought to explain away its flagrant violation of the court order by claiming that Sharif chose to go back into exile. After he was taken into custody by Pakistani security forces at Islamabad airport, Sharif was charged with money-laundering and, according to the government, then asked whether he preferred to go to prison or Saudi Arabia. Sharif's supporters vehemently deny he was given such a choice. They charge that the former prime minister was kidnapped, stripped of his passport, and then against his wishes bundled onto a plane bound for Jeddah. Sharif himself has not yet spoken with the press, presumably because Saudi authorities are holding him under house arrest.

The Bush administration has all but openly endorsed the Musharraf regime's latest outrage against democracy, just as it turned a blind alley to the bloodbath the regime perpetrated in Karachi last May 12. (See "Gunbattles in Karachi: Pakistani president seeks to drown mounting opposition in blood") Speaking just hours after Sharif's expulsion, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack conceded that the deportation "runs contrary to the Supreme Court order," but claimed "it's still a pending legal matter."

Tuesday's *New York Times* quoted an unnamed Bush administration official as saying Sharif's expulsion was "not necessarily the worst thing that could happen."

Then on Wednesday, US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte, while on a visit to Islamabad, reaffirmed Washington's strong support for the Musharraf regime, declaring that Pakistan is doing more than its share in the war on terror. Asked at a press conference about Sharif's expulsion, Negroponte gave the military regime carte blanche: "We view this as an internal Pakistani political and legal matter and it is for the government, people and authorities of Pakistan to decide."

Negroponte's remarks, while demonstrating the Bush administration's support for Sharif's kidnapping and its utter indifference to the democratic rights of the Pakistani people, are far from the whole truth.

Negroponte notwithstanding, there is every reason to believe

Washington was deeply implicated in this “internal matter”—that it discussed with, and sanctioned, the Musharraf regime’s authoritarian response to Sharif’s return.

It is an open secret that the Bush administration has for weeks been seeking to broker a deal between Musharraf—whom it views as a pivot of US policy in Central and South Asia and the Middle East—and Benazir Bhutto and her Pakistan People’s Party.

Last Friday, as the military regime was beginning to execute its plans to thwart Sharif’s return by arresting anti-government activists, Richard Boucher, the US undersecretary of state for South and Central Asia, was in Islamabad for consultations.

Washington’s role in the attempt to thwart Sharif’s return is further underscored by the active role two close US allies, the Saudi regime and Lebanon’s US-sponsored government, played in the effort to dissuade Sharif from returning and in his second exile. According to *Asia Times Online*, Saad Hariri, leader of the Sunni bloc in the Lebanese parliament, and Saudi Prince Muqrin bin Abdul Aziz were both in Islamabad Monday to assist the Musharraf government in expelling Sharif.

The PPP, for its part, has effectively given its assent to Sharif’s expulsion, taking yet another step to endear itself to the military and to Washington, which since the 1950s has been the bulwark of a succession of right-wing military governments in Islamabad.

A PPP statement said, “The Supreme Court of Pakistan had rightly ruled that a citizen has a right to return to Pakistan,” but then gave credence to the government’s claim that by returning home Sharif was violating an agreement worked out between him and the Pakistani and Saudi governments and thereby damaging Saudi-Pakistani relations.

The US hopes that Bhutto and her PPP, which has spouted pseudo-socialist rhetoric in the past, can give a reconfigured Musharraf regime some semblance of popular legitimacy. Washington’s aim is not simply to prop up a regime that has provided it a key base for implementing its predatory geopolitical agenda in west Asia and the Middle East and pursued IMF-inspired, neo-liberal socioeconomic policies. The Bush administration expects and will demand that a Bhutto-Musharraf combination mount, in the name of “enlightened” Islam, an all-out assault on Taliban and other Islamicist elements in Pakistan.

Historically, the religious right and Islamicist militias have been politically dependent on the patronage of the Pakistani establishment, especially the military. But in recent years they have gained considerable support in the North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan, due to popular anger over the US occupation of Afghanistan and the conditions of acute social deprivation over which the Pakistani bourgeoisie presides.

Washington is looking to a Musharraf-Bhutto government to solve this problem through military means—a policy that has every prospect of resulting in a civil war directed at the country’s poorest and most backward regions.

Whilst Sharif hails from a family of rich industrialists and owes his political career to the patronage of a former US-backed military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq, he and his party are seen as cutting across the plans of the Bush administration. For one thing there is deep personal hostility between Sharif and the architect of his downfall in 1999, Musharraf.

In any event, Washington views the democratic rights of Sharif and his party, like those of the Pakistani people, to be expendable.

According to press reports, the military regime’s security operation against Sharif and his supporters did succeed in intimidating the population. At most, only a few thousand took to the streets to welcome Sharif.

Given his political record, Sharif is hardly a likely candidate to spearhead a popular movement for democracy. As prime minister, he implemented IMF austerity programs, fanned religious fundamentalism, and tried to monopolize political power in the hands of his family and a small clique of Punjabi businessmen and politicians.

But Musharraf’s success may very well prove short-term.

Much as Bhutto wants to strike a deal with Musharraf under US sponsorship, negotiations have repeatedly stalled. Elements of her own party are warning that aligning with Musharraf and Bush will shatter the PPP’s political credibility. And there is much opposition within the military and the military-sponsored party, the PML (Q), to any deal with the PPP, as both fear the loss of power and patronage.

The Pakistani press has all but universally condemned the deportation of Sharif.

The *Dawn* declared: “At stake is not just the survival of a military regime that has been shaken to the core but the very fate of the ongoing movement for freedom and democracy. The people want democracy—as it is understood the world over.”

The *News* termed “the forced exile of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to Saudi Arabia on Monday ... an act of pure and utter desperation by a government that seems to be now operating very much in panic mode.”

“The government might have heaved a sigh of relief by sending Sharif back into exile,” warned a *Nation* editorial, but it “should not forget that this practice of handling political matters through the coercive arm of police and administration will further push the country towards chaos.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact