

Washington lauds Pakistan's sham presidential election

Keith Jones
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The Bush administration has lauded the sham election Pakistan's military regime staged Saturday to extend General Pervez Musharraf's presidential mandate till the fall of 2012.

"Pakistan is an important partner and ally to the United States and we congratulate them for today's election," declared US National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe.

Had Johndroe been more honest, he would have said Washington was extending congratulations to the Pakistani military for its subverting of democracy.

Saturday's presidential vote was a travesty of Pakistan's constitution and of the most elementary democratic principles.

An electoral college comprised of legislators from the country's national and provincial parliaments who were chosen fully five years ago and in elections that were rigged by the military was empowered to give Musharraf a further five-year term as president.

The general, who seized power in a 1999 coup, refused to stand for election as a civilian, although the constitution specifically bars members of the military from seeking or holding office. Musharraf clings to his post as head of Pakistan's armed forces because he is acutely conscious that the military remains his one true base of support and because he wants to be able to threaten his opponents within the elite and the Pakistani people with martial law, and to personally supervise the repression, should they disrupt his "re-election."

Moreover, the election commission, which is staffed with Musharraf loyalists, last month declared that it had amended the constitution—thereby exercising a power that is vested in Pakistan's parliament—and set aside a prohibition on persons standing for election until two years after they have retired from the military or state bureaucracy.

Some 200 opposition legislators resigned their seats in the days running up to Saturday's sham presidential election. Even the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which has struck a bargain with the military regime in pursuit of a share of power, has challenged the legitimacy of the election and of Musharraf's candidacy before the Supreme Court and ordered its legislators to abstain in Saturday's vote.

But none of this is of any consequence to the White House. Its attitude to the democratic rights of the Pakistani people is no different from that of Musharraf who dismissed all questions

surrounding the legality and legitimacy of the election by declaring "democracy means majority, whether there is opposition or no opposition." The general-president then refused to rule out imposing martial law should the Supreme Court rule either the election or his candidacy unconstitutional. Subsequently, an unnamed top Musharraf aide told the Pakistan correspondent of the *Globe and Mail* that he retains the option of "surgical martial law."

Since September 2001 the Bush administration has provided the Musharraf regime more than \$10 billion in aid. President Bush, Vice President Cheney and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice have repeatedly hailed the general-president as a pivotal ally in the war on terror, while condoning his regime's flagrant violation of human rights, including last May's massacre of opposition supporters in Karachi.

"We look forward to the electoral commission's announcement," said Johndroe, "and to working with all of Pakistan's leaders on important bilateral, regional and counterterrorism issues."

No sooner were the votes from Saturday's election tabulated than the election commission rushed to announce that Musharraf had won 98 percent of the votes cast and that Musharraf's vote equaled 55 percent of the electoral college. But the commission has been unable to certify these results and proclaim Musharraf elected because of a Supreme Court ruling issued on the eve of Saturday's vote.

The court, which has a long history of kowtowing to the military, rejected opposition petitions for the election to be delayed pending its ruling on the constitutionality of parliaments chosen five years ago constituting the presidential electoral college and the legality of Musharraf standing as a presidential candidate while serving as Chief of [Pakistan's] Armed Services. But Pakistan's highest court did declare last Friday that the election commission cannot formally proclaim Musharraf elected until it rules on the legal-constitutional questions surrounding the election.

The court is in all probability badly divided over the role of Musharraf and the military in the country's government. There is much elite anger over the military's burgeoning economic interests, divisions over the concentration of political power in Islamabad and economic power in the Punjab, and, last but not

least, growing apprehension over the mounting popular opposition to Musharraf, military rule, and the regime's neo-liberal socio-economic and abject pro-US foreign policies.

Last Friday's ruling would appear to have been aimed at pressuring Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto and her PPP to reach agreement on a power-sharing deal. Significantly, the court has announced that it will resume hearing the legal challenges to the presidential election on October 17, that is the day before Benazir Bhutto is to return to the Pakistan from an eight-year, self-imposed exile.

Over the past four months, the US has been strongly pushing for Musharraf and Bhutto to strike a power-sharing deal, in which the PPP would assist the general in staging his "re-election" and, in return, the military would allow Bhutto to lead her party in legislative elections scheduled for early 2008 and to subsequently become prime minister.

Rice reportedly telephoned both Bhutto and Musharraf last Thursday, when it appeared that the power-sharing negotiations were on the point of collapse and Bhutto was threatening to instruct the PPP's legislators to resign their seats. Only hours later both the government and Bhutto announced that a deal, subsequently called an "understanding," was imminent.

The key to the deal was a sordid "National Reconciliation Ordinance 2007" signed into law by Musharraf late Friday. It provides an amnesty to all those holders of public office between 1986 and October 12, 1999—the day Musharraf seized power—accused of corruption but whose cases have not yet been adjudicated.

The government of Nawaz Sharif, whom Musharraf deposed in 1999, had mounted various politically motivated corruption cases against Bhutto and her husband, Asif Ali Zardari, and these were continued by Musharraf as a means of pressuring Bhutto and her PPP. It should be added, however, that the Bhutto regime, like that of Sharif, and the current military regime, was notorious for its corruption. Bhutto's husband Zardari earned the nickname "Mr. 10 percent."

As per the deal, orchestrated by the Bush administration, Bhutto's PPP broke ranks with its erstwhile opposition allies Saturday and, while refusing to vote for Musharraf, signaled that it will be ready to work with him if he carries out his pledge to be sworn into office for a new presidential term as a civilian.

Washington favors a Musharraf-Bhutto partnership because it fears that the current regime could unravel in the face of mounting popular opposition and because it wants a politically strengthened government in Islamabad to unleash the full force of the Pakistani military against the Taliban and other Islamicist militias active in the country's remoter and more backward regions.

Traditionally such elements have been dependent on the support of the Pakistani elite, especially the military. But in recent years, as Islamabad has been forced to realign its geo-political posture in accordance with US demands, these groups

have gained greater popular support by appealing to opposition to US imperialism in Afghanistan and elsewhere and the social grievances born of the manifest failure of the Pakistani state to provide basic public services.

Recent months have seen the Pakistani military repeatedly thrown on the defensive in confrontations with Islamic militia groups. In South Waziristan some 200 army personnel have been held hostage for several weeks. Yesterday the military announced that it had killed 130 pro-Taliban insurgents in two days of heavy fighting in North Waziristan, while suffering 45 army fatalities.

Given the Pakistani military's indifference, if not hostility, toward democratic rights and judicial norms there is every likelihood that an all-out assault on the Taliban and Islamicist forces under a Musharraf-Bhutto government would take the form of a veritable civil war against the local population in those parts of Pakistan where Islamabad's writ has been challenged.

While Washington is placing great stock in a Musharraf-Bhutto combination there are many reasons to suggest it may prove short-lived.

The leaders of the pro-Musharraf PML (Q) have bitterly resisted a power-sharing deal with Bhutto and may yet try to scuttle it. On Saturday, the president of the PML (Q) Shujaat Hussain boasted that they had gotten the better of Bhutto: "Our aim was that the opposition must not be united."

Meanwhile, Information Minister Tariq Azim complained that Bhutto was now Washington's favorite. "It is hypocritical for anyone in Washington," exclaimed Azim, "to decide that Benazir Bhutto is to be prime minister and at the same time say that elections must be 'free and fair'."

Bhutto, for her part, is insisting that only the first stage of power-sharing negotiations have been completed and that the PPP's alliance with Musharraf must be tied to the placing of limits on the president's powers and the lifting of a constitutional prohibition on her serving as prime minister for a third time.

Bhutto has justified the PPP's alliance with Musharraf and the military with the warning that a popular mobilization against the government could soon escape the control of the political elite.

But Bhutto's return to Pakistan, despite her best efforts and those of the PPP leadership, could well prove to be a catalyst for mass protests against the discredited, US-backed Musharraf regime.



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